

THE POORHOUSE FAIR

BY JOHN UPDIKE

If they do this when the wood is green,
what will happen when the wood is dry?

LUKE 23:31

E. V. RIEU TRANSLATION

"WHAT'S THIS?"

"What's what?"

"Why, *look*."

In the cool wash of early sun the individual strands of osier compounding the chairs stood out sharply; arched like separate serpents springing up and turning again into the knit of the wickerwork. An unusual glint of metal pierced the lenient wall of Hook's eyes and struck into his brain, which urged his body closer, to inspect. Onto the left arm of the chair that was customarily his in the row that lined the men's porch the authorities had fixed a metal tab, perhaps one inch by two, bearing MR, printed, plus, in ink, his latter name. A reflex of pride twitched the corners of his mouth; he had always preferred, in the days when certain honors were allowed him, to have his name spelled in full, with the dignity of the middle initial: John F. Hook. On the adjoining chair the name of his companion, Gregg, was similarly imposed. With the eye it was not difficult to follow the shining squares all the way down the line.

"What birdbrain scheme is this now of Conner's?" Gregg asked noisily, as if the taller man might not hear. "Is he putting tags on us so we can be trucked off to the slaughterhouse?"

"Well, yes: what is it? A child must tinker."

"They'll come right off," Gregg said and produced from the hip pocket of his shapeless wool trousers a black bone jackknife of the old style, with a blade for removing the metal cap from bottles. With this blunt blade he adroitly began to loosen, not his own nameplate, but Hook's.

Gregg's small brown hands, the thumbs double-jointed and spatulate and the backs covered with dark lines as fine as hair, sought leverage with a quickness that recalled to Hook that his companion had been, before alcohol and progress had undone him, an electrician.

"Here," Hook said, hoarse as much from the discomfort it caused him to focus his eyes on action so near at hand as from disapproval. In truth he felt helpless. He enjoyed no real control over Gregg, though some crooked whim or weakness led the younger man lately to cling close to Hook's presence. It was Hook's misfortune to have

the appearance of authority yet lack the gift of command. He sought a reason that would stay Gregg. "If we forget our place, they'll take the chairs themselves off, and we'll be left to stand."

"And then all die of heart attacks; I hope we do. It'll make a fine black mark in Conner's book, to have us all keel over without a place to sit."

"It's a sin to talk on so," Hook exclaimed positively, for death, to his schoolteacher's mind, was a bell that must find the students with their noses to the desk. "And," he went on, "it is a mis-take for the old to molest others' property. The young now, the young have nothing, and may be winked at when they steal a foretaste; but those who have had what there is to be had are expected to be beyond such foolishness. We fellows so close to the Line"--he raised his voice on this last word, inclined his head, and lifted his right hand in a dainty gesture, the index and little fingers pointing upward and the two between curled down--"have our accounts watched very close." The disciplinarian's instinct--which was somewhat developed, though he had always lacked the cruelty to be the disciplinarian paramount--told him these words had been correct for the purpose; he had a shadowy sense that what Gregg sought in his company were elevated forms of thought to shape and justify the confused rage he felt toward the world that had in the end discarded him. Also, there was something in the relationship of Hook's teaching the younger man how to be old; Hook at ninety-four had been old a third of his life, whereas Gregg, just seventy, had barely begun.

"Ah, we can pick them off with our fingers any time we want," Gregg said with contempt, and, nimbly as a monkey on a rubber tire in the old-fashioned zoos, he turned and sat in Hook's chair, rather than the one labelled as his own.

"Modern day workmen are not what they were," Hook stated, satisfied. Standing on one porch edge, he rested his gaze on the comfortable depths to the east and north of the porch: shallowly concave farm plains tilled in scientifically irregular patches, the nearer lands belonging to the jurisdiction of the Poor Home; further off, small hills typical of New Jersey; presiding above, a ribbed sky, pink, betokening rain. The blurred click of Gregg's blades being snapped back into the sheath satisfied him still further. Paul ebbed from the muscles of his eyeballs as they lengthened to suit the horizon, and he felt positive pleasure. Despite the low orange sun, still wet from its dawning, crescents of mist like the webs of tent

caterpillars adhered in the crotches of the hills. Preternaturally sensitive within its limits, his vision made out the patterned spheres of an orchard on the nearest blue rise, seven miles off. Beyond and beyond the further hills, he knew ran the Delaware. His life had been spent on that river, white in morning, yellow at noon, black by supper. On the other side had stood a green rim: Pennsylvania. In those days--it would have been in the first Roosevelt's administration--when he had freshly come, direct from normal school, to teach at a building of then less than a hundred pupils, walking to work had taken him along a path from which, down the long bank through switches of sumac and sapling oak, glimpses of water had appeared as white and smooth as a plaster wall. The path ascended, passing beneath a red oak where children had attached a knotted rope and on the trunk had nailed a ladder of slats. At the highest point three shacks housing the humblest elements of the town commanded a broad view. The bank was so steep here the tops of the tallest trees clinging to it were lower than one's own shoes. The river's apparent whiteness was dissolved in its evident transparency: the contours of bars of silt and industrial waste could be easily read beneath the gliding robe of water. A submerged bottle reflected sunlight. Occasionally, among the opaque fans of corrugation spread by each strand of shore growth, the heavy oblong of a catfish could be spied drifting. The family in one of the shacks did woodcutting; the air at this place in the path where Hook usually paused always smelled of sawdust, even in winter, through the snow. And across the width of water a curtain of trees hung, united with its reflection, unmarked by a house or puff of smoke. To Hook Pennsylvania had been the westerly wilderness, and when he crossed the bridge at Trenton it surprised him to encounter houses and streetcars as advanced as those in his native state.

His eyes had a thirst for water, but no amount of study would turn the blue-green hills into a river, and even were the intervening land shaved as clear as a table top, the Delaware would be hidden from him by the curvature of the earth--eight inches to the mile, as he recalled it. His education was prominent in two places: Roman history, which he had received in the grammar school of his day, and nineteenth-century American politics, talk of which had filled his father's home.

Closer to where he stood, on this side of the rough sandstone wall the women were beginning to move about on the dark grass, picking up sticks and carrying tables; foolish women, the dew would soak their feet.

"The sky suggests rain," he said, returning to Gregg in voice while not moving.

"The f.ing bastard I have half a mind to snip every one of these rotten tags off and throw them in his birdbrain face."

These wild words were not worth answering, and an answer, no matter what, would involve him deeper with Gregg. He felt distaste for Gregg: he was like a student who, having been given the extra attention due the sheep in a hundred that has strayed, then refuses to know his place, and makes of the older man's consideration a cause for a displeasing familiarity. Yet Gregg's physical aspect, and specifically the small, stained, wrinkle-hatched, dour and dangerous face that left no impression of its eyes, inspired persistent affection, reminding Hook of Harry Petree. Against Harry Petree's memory Hook abruptly shut his mind.

He said, "Aren't the women foolish now, to be setting up for the fair with a storm at their elbows? They'll be bringing in those tables before noon. No doubt Conner put them up to it."

The sense of moisture ascending was everywhere: on the sandstone walls, some stones wet and others without clear reason dry; in the odor of the freshened grass; in the amplified sound of the grackles in the maples to the left and the chatter of the women down below; in the hazy solid movements of the women. Tens of thousands of such mornings had Hook seen.

The deepening of the sky, however, above the southeast horizon, where it should be lightest, and the proclamatory weight of the slow wind that fitfully blew, were peculiar to this day.

"A bit of ago," he stated, "the sky was savage red."

Gregg raved on, "What we ought to do is take one of these tabs every day and mail it to him, a different tab every day; the post office can't refuse our custom."

"Such talk," Hook sighed, lowering himself philosophically into the chair to the left of Gregg, his customary position. Since Gregg was sitting not on the chair labelled his own but perversely in Hook's, Hook correspondingly occupied a wrong chair. When George Lucas came around the porch, from the side beneath the maples, he unthinkingly sat beside Hook, as he always did. "Have you noticed these tags?" Hook asked his other friend.

"The damn bastard Conner," Gregg shouted across, "I have half a mind to strip every one of them off."

Lucas was a fat man, yellowish in complexion, with a brief hooked nose. Young by the standards of the place, he had been a truck farmer in the southern wedge of Diamond County. His land had been requisitioned by a soybean combine organized by the Federal Department of Conservation. With the money they paid Lucas he had begun a real estate business in the nearest town, where he was well known, and had failed. He knew land but displeased people. Hook himself, charitable and gregarious to a fault, found it hard to enjoy association with Lucas, not because of the man's bluntness, but because he seemed preoccupied still with the strings of the outer world and held himself aloof from the generality of inmates. His friendship with Hook, Hook felt, served some hidden use. As a legally declared bankrupt Lucas had come to the poorhouse less than three years past, the winter of Mendelssohn's funeral. He was forever digging in his ear with a wooden match to keep an earache alive. "No," he said, "where are the tags?" As he said this an instinct made him lift the wrist beneath which the silver rectangle glittered.

"They put these on the chairs so we won't lose our way," Hook stated with irony.

"But this ain't mine, it's Benjie's chair," Lucas was saying, having read the name imbedded in the arm.

"A child like Conner must tinker endless-ly," Hook continued, deafened by his own chain of thought. He felt his wrist being lifted and his wine-dark lips quivered with being startled as he gradually brought his eyes to bear on the man inches from him.

"This is my chair," Lucas said. "You have it."

"Well, Billy is seated in mine."

"Come on then, Gregg: get up," Lucas said.

Furious, Gregg screamed between held teeth, "That son of a bitch I'd like to stick one of these tags down his throat and listen to the f.er scream when he tried to pass it."

Bending and bowing in a variety of friezes, the three men each moved up one chair in the long row that with the earliness of the hour was full in a bar of dull bronze sun.

"Rain," Lucas said, seated again.

"Goddam it I hope it pours buckets and washes out the whole damn business. We'll see then how high and mighty Conner thinks he is."

"And have no fair?" Lucas said. "The women love it so." His wife was also at the Home.

Settled in his own chair Hook felt more in charge. "Depend upon it," he said, "there are no workmen now as there were in my day. The carpenters of fifty years ago could drive a stout nail as long as my finger in three strokes. The joints that they would fit: pegs and wedges cut out of the end of a beam to the fine-ness of a hair, and not split the wood though they were right with the grain. And how they would hunt, for the prongs of the old-time carriages, to find a young birch that had been bent just that way. To use the wood of a branch was considered of a piece with driving two nails where one would hold. The cut nails, you know. Then wire became common, and all their thinking was done for them by the metal manufacturers."

"Now it's all soybean plastics," Lucas said.

"Yes: to make a juice and pour it into a mold and watch it harden. What is there in that? Rafe Beam, my father's handy man, could split a sunflower seed with his hatchet so you couldn't tell between the two halves. He used to say to me, 'Aren't you fearful of standing so close?', then he'd touch the blade to my nose, so you know gay-making, and show me the end of his thumb between his fingers." He demonstrated and smiled.

"Dontcha think," Gregg called to Lucas, "we ought to do something about this putting our names on the chairs like branding f.ing cattle?"

Hook resented this appeal, across him, to the other man. Lucas, deep in his ear, showed no disposition to answer, so Hook announced, "Caution is the bet-ter part of action. No doubt it is an aspect of Conner's wish to hold us to our place. Any motion on our part to threaten his security will make him that much more unyielding. They used to say, 'A wise dog lets the leash hang limp.' It might be more politic, now, if we breathed a word to the twin, and hear his explanation. You may be sure of this: tear yours off now and a new one will be on before noon."

"The twin," Gregg said contemptuously. "He knows less what goes

on in Conner's brain than we do."

"Ah, don't be that sure," Hook said. "We old fellas, we don't know the half of what goes on."

"The twin isn't even half a man he's half a moron. What I think is we ought to go up to Conner in a body and say, 'O.K., Birdbrain Conner, treat us like humans instead of stinking animals or we'll write our grievances to the government in Washington.' The post office can't refuse our custom, we aren't sunk that low yet."

Hook smiled thinly. The sun had so risen that the shadow of the porch eave was across his eyes, while his lips and chin remained in the bronze light of the haze-softened sun. His lips appeared to speak therefore with individual life, "We must bide our time. Any size-able motion on our part will make Conner that much more in-secure. Now Rafe Beam used to recite,

'A wise old owl

Sat in an oak.

The more he heard,

The less he spoke.

The less he spoke,

The more he heard:

Let's imitate

This wise old bird."

Lucas, grimacing, had been digging into his ear, and now, watery-eyed from the pain, studied his two companions. Then, his eyes on the sulphur end of the match-stick, he said, "If you want, I'll go up to Conner and ask what his idea was."

Hook's sole answer was to draw up to his height in his chair; his face lifted entirely into shadow. The corners of his lips were downdrawn as fine as pencil points. Lucas had no fear of Conner; it was what everyone had noticed. Hook had momentarily forgotten.

"You give him this," Gregg said, and he held up and vibrated a skinny white fist, yellow in the sun, "and tell him it came from me."

CONNER'S office was approached by four flights of narrowing stairs, troublesome for these old people. Accordingly few came to see him. He intended in time to change this; it was among the duties of the prefect, as he conceived the post, to be accessible. It had not been he but his predecessor Mendelssohn who had chosen to center the executive in the cupola. Why, Conner could guess from the look of the man in his coffin and the layout of the buildings. Though the fourth flight, the last and narrowest --tan unpainted stairs rising between green walls barely a shoulders'-breadth apart--led only to the cupola and alone led away from it, once this brief diagonal descent had been made, a man could easily thread unseen through the fourth floor--half of it the closed doors of the bedridden--to the rear stairs, and thus reach the out-of-doors, and sneak behind the pig buildings and along the edge of the west wall into the adjacent town of Andrews, where Mendelssohn was well-known as a daytime drinker. The altitude of the office assured that it would seldom be visited, except by Mendelssohn's subordinates, who understood him. Further, the view commanded from the cupola was inclusive and magnificent. From what Conner had seen in the coffin--the ponderous balding head, the traces of Jewishness in the vital nostrils and the smile the embalmers had been unable to erase from the lips like the lips of a gash long healed, the faint eyebrows, the unctuously, painfully lowered lids--Mendelssohn had in part thought of himself as God.

Conner thought of no one as God. The slats of light from the east and south windows, broken into code by the leaves and stems of the plants on the sills, spoke no language to him. He had lost all sense of omen. Rising as early as Hook, he had looked at the same sky and seen nothing but promise of a faultless day for the fair. Young for the importance of his position, devout in the service of humanity, Conner was unprepossessing: the agony, unworthy of him, he underwent in the presence of unsympathetic people was sensed by them, and they disliked him for it. The ignorant came to him and reaped more ignorance; he had no gift of conversion. The theatre of his deeds was filled with people he would never meet--the administrators, the report-readers--and beyond these black blank heads hung the white walls of the universe, the listless, permissive mother for whom Conner felt not a shred of awe, though, orthodox in the way of popular humanist orators, he

claimed he did. Yet there were a few --friends, he supposed. Buddy was one, the twin, tapping out budgetary accounts at his porcelain table in the corner of the spacious room. Frequently Conner could feel Buddy's admiration and gratitude as a growing vegetal thing within himself, fed by his every action, especially the more casual; the joking words, the moan over a tangled business, the weary rising at the end of the day to pour, out of a wax-paper cup, a little drinking water on the roots of the decorative plants--like the Venetian blinds, a post-Mendelssohn innovation. Moving in, Conner had found the office bare, drab, dirty, unordered: a hole where a tramp napped.

"Conner? Hey, Conner." It was Lucas's habit to come half-way up the last flight and then shout, his voice highly acoustical in the narrow enclosure. Conner did not know how to correct him; there was no bell; he did not know how they did it in Mendelssohn's day, nor did Lucas, Lucas and his wife having entered the place a month after the new prefect.

"Yes, George. Come on up." He frowned for Buddy to see and kept his hands on the piece of paper he had been reading, a letter from an anonymous townsman. Buddy's hands ostentatiously rapped on, not compromising his noise for their visitor. The twin's brain in boyhood had been soaked in thrillers, and to him Lucas was the Informer, indispensable yet despicable.

Indeed, that Lucas, in the midst of such general hostility, should be comparatively natural with him made Conner himself uneasy. The man perhaps thought he was winning kindness for his wife, though there was no evidence that he was; impartiality with Conner was a crucial virtue. By way of comment on his puffing, Lucas said, "A lot of stairs. You'd think you were hiding."

Conner smiled mechanically, his eyes glancing to the letter; help not hinder, I myself, and rights leaped from between his fingers. He lacked the presence, however, to hold a silence. "Martha getting her cake made?" he asked, clipping away minor words in embarrassment at being conventionally cordial.

"She's fussing at something, I know."

"You must be glad," Conner said, "that she's on her feet again." He felt this remark instantly as fatuous; of course Lucas was glad. Yet he had meant it well, and he felt irritation at the invisible apparatus that, placed between himself and any of the inmates, so

scrupulously judged the content of expressions that were meant to be carelessly amiable.

To his relief Lucas removed their talk to the plane of business. "They noticed their names on the porch chairs downstairs."

Conner's heart tripped, absurdly. He should have given up hope of pleasing them long ago; it was enough to help them. Ideally, his dedication wore blinders, but he was too weak not to glance to the side for signs of approval. The sculptor has his rock and the saint the silence of his Lord, but a man like Conner who has vowed to bring order and beauty out of human substance had no third factor; he is a slave, at first, to gratitude. In time, he knew, this tender place grows callous; he had heard the older men whose disciple he was discuss, not entirely in joking, mass murder as the ultimate kindness the enlightened could perform for the others. "From your tone," he said to Lucas, "I take it their noticing should cause me anxiety."

"Well, they're confused. They can't read your purpose."

"Who is this they?"

Lucas poked something small and wooden into his ear and made a face of pain, his clayey skin eroding in rivers suddenly.

"You needn't name them," Conner added.

"Hook and Gregg were the ones I heard talking about it."

"Hook and Gregg. Poor Gregg, of course, is one notch removed from dementia. Hook is something else. Tell me, do you think Hook is senile?"

"In the head? No."

"Then there must be a rational cause that has set him against me."

"Oh, he's not against you. He just talks on the first thing that comes into his mind."

"And I'm always in his mind. What better friend does he think he has than myself? Hook's been here fifteen years; he knows what it was like under Mendelssohn."

Lucas looked startled to be feeling the edge of an apologia that was,

Conner realized, principally excited by the preposterous and insulting letter he had been reading. "He speaks real well of him," Lucas said, with an odd steadiness of his eyes. "I have no opinion; I came here after you."

"Half the county home acres were lying fallow, waste. The outbuildings were crammed with refuse and filth. The west wing was a death trap. When Hook, last autumn, ate that unwashed peach, he would have died if Mendelssohn had still been in charge."

"Doesn't anybody realize," Buddy interjected in his somewhat frantic boy's voice, "what Mr. Conner has done here? This home has one of the five highest ratings in the north-eastern sector."

"I read that on the bulletin board. It makes us all proud." Lucas's hands went to the side of his head, and his face crumpled again. This over, he asked soberly, "But now what was the idea about the nameplates?" Dogged, flashed on Conner as an adequate summation of Lucas.

Conner wondered if it were wisest to be silent. Words, any words, gave a person a piece of yourself. Swiftly, reasons marshalled against this unworthy impulse:

You should not make shows of authority.

Lucas, fat and blunt and coarse-pored as he was, soiling the order of this office and the morning's routine, deserved politeness, as one of the unfortunates.

If Conner fudged, Lucas would convey the fact to the others.

The question was not, as it seemed (so strong was Conner's impression this moment of defiance and ingratitude everywhere), an impudence to which there is no answer.

There was an answer; everything Conner did he did for a reason; his actions were glass.

His motives occurred to him; he stared at the shine on Lucas's taut hooked nose and then shot his gaze to the stripes of blue at the window, saying, "There have been complaints, a complaint--one of the women came to me, in regard to her husband--that on rainy days the men who work on the farm can't find chairs on the porch, or at least the chairs they think of as their own. The vacant chairs are scattered, so some are unable to sit with their friends. It's

childish, of course. Mendelssohn, I'm sure, would have laughed her away. But I--my duty is to take all complaints seriously. Part of my policy has been, within the limits of the appropriations, to give the residents here some sense of ownership. I think especially of men like Hook, who have known a share of respect and prosperity. It strengthens, is my belief, rather than weakens a communal fabric to have running through it strands of private ownership. Lucas, I want to help these men to hold up their heads; to retain to the end the dignity that properly belongs to every member, big or little, of humanity."

He pivoted in his socketed chair and saw that in his typing corner Buddy was blushing jealously, to hear his superior speak with such fervor to an interloper. The boy (so touching, his blurted proclamation of their fifth-place honors) had perhaps assumed that the image of the thread of private property and the hope concerning dignity to the end had been a confidence shared between just the two of them. It would not do for Conner to explain, by even so much as the tone of his eyes, that in this instance, without disbelieving his words, he was using them more for their impact than their sense, more to keep Lucas at a distance than convey a creed. When Conner had been Buddy's age he would have been repelled by any revelation to the effect that within the outer shell of a man's idealism is fitted a shell of cynicism; within this shell, another, contracted compared to the first, of idealism, and so on down, in alternate black and white, to the indivisible center; and that it is by the color of the star here alone that the course of a man's life is set. Obliquely mitigating his unintended offense to Buddy, Conner mentioned his name in continuing to Lucas, "Mr. Lee, with a few of the other women, took much trouble in fixing each man's favorite chair. In some cases the old men themselves sat in a new place every day. The present arrangement is a work of love on his part. And yet Hook takes it as a cause of complaint. This is the reward Mr. Lee receives for the devotion he brings to his work in this institution; his talents would earn him three times his present salary in private or semi-private industry."

"Well, I'll tell them," Lucas said, though his attention for the last minute had been turned toward the inside of his head.

Perhaps still appeasing Buddy, Conner asked sharply, "What in hell are you doing to your ear?"

"A little soreness." Lucas went on the defensive; his head bowed and the pink inner skin of his cumbersome lower lip showed.

"For how long?"

"Not long."

"A day? Two?"

"I guess longer."

"You've been running an earache for longer than two days. What medication have you received?"

No answer.

Conner answered for him, "None."

"I've had a soreness, off and on, for some time."

He might have been speaking of an animal he had befriended. "Well, could you go to the west wing now, please? And throw the matchstick into the wastebasket. This waste-basket. Good God, you'll give yourself otomycosis." Conner hated, more than anything, pain dumbly endured. Oppression, superstition, misery--all sank their roots in meekness.

Lucas, turned into a child by this undeserved streak of rebuke, left as commanded. Conner, grieving for the bad temper brought on by the uneasy conscience unjustly forced on him by Buddy's sulk and the letter on his desk, rose and stood by the east windows and looked down through parted blinds to people foreshortened on grass. On the east, south, and west sides, the cupola had big windows, sets of three with round-arched tops, the middle one taller than the two flanking. The metal supporting the Venetian blinds muddled the stately lines, and the semi-circles, each fitted of five pieces of hand-worked wood, peeked above the manufactured horizontals like the upper margin of a fresco painted where now an exit has been broken through. On the fourth side, the north, the steep stairway climbed from the floor below, contained within the external silhouette of the cupola, so that the door came into the room, making on each side of it an alcove, in which a simpler window had been let. Light at all times of the day came into the room; each standing object in it became a sundial, which no one there could read. The man, Walter Andrews, who seventy years before had built the mansion had meant this for the piano room; the system of supports and joints above had been left free, diagonal rafters and slender crossbeams where music could entwine, and the musicians grouped around the piano below could play on and on,

feeding the growing cloud above without having their noise press out from the walls and crowd them. The piano was still in the room, underlying terraces of green steel cabinets. There was no way of getting it out; it had been hoisted up and set on the bare floor when the room was unfinished. Where the east set of windows were the next day placed, the wall was open on blue air, the ends of the golden boards making a ragged hole in which the romantic black piano-shape appeared, a miracle, the ropes too thin it seemed, the workmen apprehensive, a breeze blowing, the points of the tapered legs tracing a fugal phrase largo on the emptiness as the huge instrument gently twirled in its secure cradle of rope. The piano within, the workers completed the well-knit wall, Andrews giving no consideration to the day after tomorrow or to the species that would follow his.

The tall space above, crossed with stained beams, catered to a kind of comfort not proper to executive and clerical work. Conner came from a world of low ceilings, onion-gray or egg-blue, made still lower by fluorescent structures. The space below made him uneasy, too. "Damn these people," he said, his lips an inch from the sharp blond edge of a subtly curved slat of the blinds. "Now down there's Hook, making his rounds like the mayor of the place, talking to everybody, stirring them up for some crusade."

To Buddy, watching, the profile of his superior was incisive against the luminous blinds: the little round nose above the long bulging lip of an Irishman, in saddened repose. In his rush of love Buddy had to speak, any words, and the first words came to him from what was bearing on his mind, "Don't you think we could dispense with Lucas? He learns more than he tells, and physically, you must admit, he's a monstrous error."

"AH, Mrs. Jamiesson," Hook said, "don't the apples shine in your cheeks this morning? That's what Ed Hertzog used to say, when greeting the women after church service."

She was tacking an oilcloth frill to the front edge of the bare table she had set in the grass, and he was standing in her way. "Could you hold that there with your fingers?" she asked him.

"De-lighted, posolutely delighted," he said, mimicking someone else, a normal school chum, forty years dead, named Horace Frye. His downward vision was so poor he set his fingers along the naked

edge of wood, and when Mrs. Jamiesson went with her hands for the hammer and tacks, the scalloped strip fell, the unfastened end of it into the drenched grass. As if managing a baby and his spoon she laid her tools aside and gripped his hand and brought the cloth to it and pressed his fingers against the edge. He let her drive one tack and stood away, his eyes on the top of the silver maple by the west wing. "That sound," he announced, "is music to my ears; the carpenters in my day would drive a coarse nail with three swift strokes."

"Well I guess I'm not one of them," Mrs. Jamiesson said. She was a heavy woman whom homeliness had trained to a life of patience and affection. It was a wonder to her mother that this daughter, with the freakishly protuberant jaw, had married and held the man and raised a family. The waspish temper she had inherited from her beautiful mother Mary Jamiesson had repressed, a luxury she had to do without. Yet a lively tongue never quite dies. "It's a rare sight for me," she went on, "to see a man do any work; else I guess I'd learn something."

Hook did not miss the sense of her remark, only its application to him. "It's the administration," he confided. "To let a man choose idleness or labor, on the ground of whim: why in Mendelssohn's time such a thing would never be seen. Able-bodied men like Gregg and Lucas--it's a wonder they haven't grown too lazy to lift the food to their mouths at mealtimes."

"Lucas has the pigs, though." Mrs. Lucas was a companion of hers.

"What day's work is that, to carry the garbage from the kitchen to the trough?"

"Well it's more than some do," Mrs. Jamiesson observed.

Uneasiness crept over Hook. The woman's implication --that women did the work of the place--was disagreeable to him, like a scent which raises the fine hairs on an animal. "Isn't it strange now, the only muscle which never tires is the tongue," he said, and moved on, forgetting who had begun this train of remarks. The long-grass lawn, now that the sun had moved higher, turned toward yellowness; in the center of the main walk, two old men were slowly unravelling electric cords, cardboard boxes of colored bulbs behind their legs. A stepladder lay flat in the grass. One of the men fumbled at a snarl as if this were his sole task for all the time remaining in God's scheme. A robin scolded wheep wheep in the

tree nearby. Beyond the south wall, the landscape extended itself generously; deliberate stands of trees were dotted like islands over the land; a few houses, outreaches of Andrews, intruded their colors on the left edge of his aimed vision. He coughed and stated, "Now I can remember," and noticed he was standing alone. He moved closer to the men on the walk. The one not fiddling with the snag was removing bulbs from their beds of tissue paper and laying them, so that no two of the same color touched, on the bench. "Now I can remember, as a boy, how you could go to the top of a hill and not see a house in any direction. "Now"--he coughed again, since the heads of neither had moved--"there can't be a foot of earth east of the Alleghenies where a body can stand and not be within hailing distance of a house. We have made the land very tame." Hook cocked his head inquisitively. He decided he had picked two deaf ones. Their names escaped him.

Turning away, he felt like a rise of unplowed land which approached from below swells unexpectedly and in a spattering of daisies makes a join with the sky. All the movements of preparation around him gladdened him. He was glad of Gregg's absence; the man had gone to the kitchen, to wheedle a second breakfast. There was one lack, one shallow pit in the surface of his pleasure: he had no cigar in his hand. He allowed himself four a day, and in the discussion over the tags had neglected to light his morning one; he did this now, a White Owl. The barn odor filled his mouth; he posed, cupping the elbow of his cigar arm in his other hand, the other arm braced gracefully against his abdomen.

The wooden tables--their eating tables before the dining hall was fitted with square tables of synthetic marble purchased from a renovated cafeteria--were arranged partly along the main walk, but principally in two alleys at right angles to the walk, straight across the grass. Because the old people did it the lines were not absolutely straight. Hook strolled down one of these alleys, angling the cigar this way and that in friendly fashion. By Amelia Morris's table he halted. She was a short old woman, in her eighties and thus not far from Hook himself, who wore an ancient stiff bonnet and had a goiter hanging around her neck. Each year she made from rags a few quilts, perhaps six in all, which she sold each August at the fan:. Last year a man from Trenton had bought four.

"Do you expect your sharper from Trenton again this year?"

"I hope to heaven not. It makes it so dull to have them sold so quick."

"That fella, dollars to doughnuts he was one of those antique dealers, and peddled them for thrice what he paid you."

"Last year it was so disappointing; he bought all I had left and there was nothing left for me but to go to bed and miss all the music." Her voice had a crooning quality, as if it originated deeper than most and rose through a screen; she had a tendency to let the ends of her sentences impatiently drop, which led Hook to bend toward her.

"I wager," he said, "he made a ver-y hand-some profit."

"I like to see the young couples have them, but you know how they care only for the new things. I was the same way myself."

One of her quilts, folded, rested on the table. The remainder were in two boxes labelled with the name of a dehydrated milk. At the end of a year of threading and biting and matching, she stretched the simple arrangement of them on the table into a full morning's job, refolding, patting, replacing them in the boxes, dawdling and turning until she felt quite dizzy and had to beg for a chair. Of the quilt displayed, one square was of a cloth on which a green hill had been printed, covered with uncommonly large flowers, and a river wound at its base, and on its crest had been planted a small open temple, the blue of the sky showing between the pillars. This figure had been repeated over the fabric. The square of cloth next to this one was evenly dark, the color of purple vetch. Next to this was a coarse plaid weave, many colors but sober, the largest stripe a green, making in the section a cross. The first square of the next row, beneath the temple and hill, seemed silk, a blue that appeared to retreat beyond the surface of the cloth, dotted with warm rectangles and crescents. The next patch was savage red; violently strewn across it strange golden forms like a carved alphabet or furniture molding. Another square showed children running carrying a pail. Another was brown corduroy, another green cotton. Another--here Hook disbelieved. The violet ground, the five yellow ovals around a blue five-point star, within a brown square, again and again, were too much like his childhood bedspread for belief--the very dusty grape tone, the nameless flowers seen so squarely from above. In the confused way of recollections from that time he saw himself as a child wandering among the rectilinear paths of the pattern, searching for the deeper-dyed thread that occasionally, in the old woven cloth, would arch above the others. In the rough-walled room lit by kerosene, the wick kept thriftily low, he saw the coverlet waiting for him; it was evening, he was a child. His parents

were down below; his father's voice shook softly up the stairs. He felt no great resentment, for as a serious-minded child he feared the dark but knew that he must sleep, when the time came each day. Studying the cloth Hook felt the small condensed grief-- that the past was so far, the end so near--secreted safe within his system well up and fill his head so exactly the thin arcs of his eyes smarted with what they contained. He blinked rapidly, erasing the glow of that kerosene lamp.

"Now how Mendelssohn," he said, "would have stroked and patted this quilt."

"Wouldn't he though? He gave me such encouragement."

"It was his way."

"He was like McKinley," Mrs. Mortis exclaimed, invoking a girlhood idol of hers, "for dignity, yet he was never too busy to drop a kind word." Her face in the shadow of the bonnet was uplifted rhapsodically. "That's how you know them, John."

Her high tone, and his old debater's instinct, prompted him, above his fundamental agreement, to enter a qualification. "They say, you know," Hook said, "that in regards to administration, he would let a few things slip. But in his day there wasn't such idleness as you see now."

"Ah, and often I can picture him in the mind's eye saying grace," she continued, her goiter bouncing like the breast of a clucking chicken, "with his eyes downcast so. gracious, and his voice booming out so even the deafest could hear; in his coffin, I remember saying to Mrs. Haines, he looks like he's come to the end of a prayer, his nostrils still full of its breath. My heart told me to stoop and kiss his hand, but the line was pushing."

"He had a natural faith--"

"You know them when you come across them, rare as that is. Oh, we've had our time, John."

Hook did not think it was a woman's obligation to tell him he had had his time. Amy Mortis was a woman of his own generation--she would have been marriageable to him--and along with the corresponding virtues she had the talkativeness, the presuming habit, the familiarity of such women; calling him "John." He enjoyed conversing with them, but not as much as they with him,

nor for as long. Yet as with his late wife, he was too weak, too needful of her audience to break away, and instead lingered to lecture.

"Now, that McKinley was nothing but Mark Hanna's parade uniform; the man he beat was twenty times his greater, and he did it on the strength of New York and Boston money. Bryan."

"Yes, one of those wanting to steal everything from the rich and give it to the poor and now that they've done it, are we better off? Are the poorhouses empty? Why, no: they're building more and still they're crowded. I feel so sorry for the younger women, having to share those tiny rooms. Young Bessie Jamiesson lying down at night with Liz Gray, who hasn't washed herself in human memory. And the Lucases and that bird keeping for themselves a room that would do for four humans."

Having forgotten what he wanted to say, Hook shook his head negatively and thoughtfully pulled on the cigar. The metallic cloud, as good as any sensible masculine argument, hung in the air between them, then snapped away. Taking his time within the won advantage, he pronounced, "Were Mark Hanna still running the country, good lady, our kind would be dead long past."

"Yes and wouldn't it be an improvement," she said with great readiness, as if she had been impatiently watching the sentence take form in his head. "We hang on and hang on and spend our time on such foolishness"--a scrabbly motion indicated the quilts--"when if we had any sense we'd let the Lord take us and start us off fresh."

"You don't antici-pate, then, any difficulties, on the other side?"

The suggestion in his tone that there was crudeness in her religion irritated her. She said, "Well, if there are for me, few'll pass," showing that in asking her rights she could be as testy with the Lord as with any other man. "I've been as good as most."

"Ah, yes," he said, breathing admonitory smoke, before the comedy of her spunk occurred to him, and his mustache broadened, and he promised her that if, as was likely, he got there before her, he would certainly save her a place on the settee. Making this guarantee he bowed with cocky gallantry above the nearly dwarfish figure of the good lady. There vibrated between them something of the attraction he had of old exercised on members of the opposite sex.

THE ENTRY DOOR to the west wing whispered shut behind Lucas and he was frozen. There was white on both sides of him, extending like the repetition of a few beds in double mirrors, with increasing dimness, to the end beds by the Palladian windows, which shed on the linen a pearly, generalized light. The west wing did not get the sun directly until the latter part of the day. The figures beneath some of the sheets made faint movements; a skeletal arm lifted to gain attention, a pink scrubbed head turned listlessly to take in the new entrant. The sheets did not seem to have beneath them persons but a few cones, from the points of which the folds sloped apparently to the mattress, and Lucas thought of parts of bodies--feet, the pelvis, shoulders without arms--joined by tubes of pliable glass, transparent so the bubbling flow of blood and yellow body juices could be studied. The impression was upon him before he could avert his eyes. Incapable of any retreat he looked on the floor, fearful above all of accidentally finding among the composed faces of these ailing and doomed the face of an acquaintance, someone with whom he had shared a talk on the sunporch, or walked into Andrews with. On the floor his helpless eyes noticed the marks made by the soft wheels of the stretcher-wagon. Even more than black death he dreaded the gaudy gate: the mask of sweet red rubber, the violet overhead lights, the rattling ride through washed corridors, the steaming, breathing, percolating apparatus, basins of pink sterilizer, the firm straps binding every limb, the sacred pure garb of the surgeons, their eyes alone showing, the cute knives and angled scissors, the beat of your own heart pounding through the burnished machinery, the green color of the surgeon's enormous compassionate eyes, framed, his quick breath sucking and billowing the gauze of his mask as he carved. Carved. Surgeons bent over you like lions gnawing the bowels of a deer. Lucas had watched his father die of cancer of the bowel. It was the family death, for males.

Many of the heads suspended on the white waves were turned to him by now. Lucas, with his big body and strange skin, was not inconspicuous. Dr. Angelo came up to him silently. "Yes?"

The doctor was a middle-aged Italian, highly handsome, though his head was a bit too big for his body, and his eyes for his head. It was as if the years of service and fatigue that had subdued his Latin mannerliness to mere staring, indeed dazed, gentleness had also been a drag on his lower lids: his green irises rode a boat of milk, under a white sky. Thus his eyes were targets.

"Conner thought I should come here."

"Why did Conner think that?"

"No reason, except to get me out of his way."

Angelo waited, the beautiful mouth smiling regretfully beneath the two ovals of gray hair symmetric on his upper lip. He held some cards in his hands but showed no sign of being interrupted. "Is the difficulty rectal?" he at last suggested.

"Oh, hell, no. No. It's just my ear. A little itching that comes and goes now and then."

"Could we have a look? Come over here, Mr--?"

"Lucas. George R."

"Yes. You have a wife. Did her legs improve?"

"Wonderfully. We're both wonderful. The ear doesn't pain at all now, but I guess that's always the way."

"Mm." Angelo led the way to his office, a brown desk shielded by frosted glass partitions, but open in the front. One entire pane was papered with licenses, permits and certificates of authority from state and federal bureaus.

"This ear?"

"The other."

Angelo inserted the nozzle of a brass funnel painfully deep into Lucas's head and murmured with a trace of pride, "Definitely inflamed. How have you been irritating this canal?"

"I try to keep it clear of wax," Lucas admitted, Ms voice made flat, loud, and hollow by the cold metal in his ear.

"How is the other?"

"First-rate. Never a twinge or anything."

"May we see?" And the frightening operation was repeated. Lucas wanted all metal to keep away from his body. With a certain brutality the icy intruder in his head squirmed, and Angelo's wet breath beat on the side of his neck. "Nothing," Angelo decided

finally.

Lucas was sufficiently relieved to observe across the aisle from the office a gaunt woman, of seemingly prodigious length, switching her head back and forth on the pillow, as regular as a pendulum.

"Let's try this," Angelo said. A soft rubber mask was clapped over the bad ear; he winced. "Tender?" Angelo asked.

"A little, but you know ... nothing." It occurred to him, with a muffled inner jolt, that his ear was quite badly off; would have to be lanced. He had heard rumors all his life of this operation; nothing was more painful. It was brief, they said, a mere moment, an atom of pain, but of such pain as couldn't be bettered; the prick pierced all the layers of numbness right through to the ultimate, blue-hot sheet of pain that set the limit to suffering.

Angelo threw a switch at the side of his desk, by the radiator. "Just tell me the numbers you hear."

Lucas figured that if he passed this test he would be let off the lancing. At first it was easy. The voice was a woman's, very slow and ticky, like a phone operator's. He repeated after her, "13 ... 74 ... 5 ..." Her voice grew higher as she sank into a lake of viscid substance. "12," she called, "99." In the strain of listening the rustle of blood in his head created static. "Uh, 99." His tongue had become queerly cumbersome; his heart fluttered high in his chest. He missed the woman's next two cries, so deep and tiny had she grown. The head across the aisle turned left, then right on the pillow, like a whig-beat. Lucas ventured, "80?"

Angelo impatiently tore away the rubber cup. In his anxiety Lucas had pressed it hard against his skull; his ear smarted.

"Grace," Angelo called. "Grace!" To the girl who appeared he said, "Lucas. George R., please."

His eyes settled into fixity. The two irises enlarged and merged into one great opaque black pupil circled by considerate green, which shield pressed against Lucas's chest. Wriggling under this weight of attention Lucas's mind desperately sought to gain a glimpse of the phantom Grace and whatever cruel instruments she was bringing. How could he know what grim message the simple syllables of his name, in Angelo's mouth, had spelled to her? Smiling tirelessly, Angelo explained in monotonously intoned detail the clinical nature of his aural morbidity. Lucas caught none of it, except when

Angelo, in specifying the location of the worst redness, made a circle with his thumb and forefinger and with a finger of the other hand rubbed the wrinkly part of the thumb skin and said, "Right in around here. Between seven and eight o'clock." A queer trick, his making the ear a timepiece; there was something insane in so much explanation.

All Grace brought was a blue card. Making swift marks on it, Angelo asked if he had ever had that upper molar pulled. Two years ago it had been noted as dead and liable to abscess.

"It never gave me no trouble."

"A submerged infection doesn't always declare itself to the nervous system. There are instances of an abscess at the root of a tooth--up in here, you see--" he touched one half of his mustache--"inserting poison into the bloodstream until the host suffers a coronary. Will you make an appointment please with Dr. Duff's secretary, you know the office? The second door to the left as you leave the ward." While saying this he fussed in his desk. "Now. Steady, please."

He came at the side of his eye with something long and thin.

Lucas reared away, half-rising.

Angelo smiled. The heavy beauty of his face loomed beyond a small rod of cotton-tipped wood, which he held up for Lucas to see. "We're going to apply a little zinc to ease the irritation." He did this, inserting the warm gray unguent with a careful twirling motion that tickled ultimate turnings dangerously near, Lucas felt, seats of pain. But Angelo, godlike, resisted the temptation, so understandable to Lucas at this moment, to prod a sensitive spot. He was soon done. He gave Lucas a small silver tube, several wooden wands, and a wad of cotton wrapped in orange tissue. The ointment was to be applied three times a day. If the trouble did not vanish in four days, return. Rolled on inertly by the sound of his voice, Angelo asked if Lucas were ready for the fair today, and said something implying that Lucas and his kind seized this annual opportunity to import hard liquor and get "a load on" behind the north wall.

Lucas had never heard of such a practice. "What year did this happen?"

Angelo looked surprised. "Every year. Don't you know about it? I forget, you're a married man."

"Oh--" Lucas felt himself expected to smirk. "I know enough. Being married doesn't mean you never lift your arm."

Angelo, for a moment uncertain, like a joking priest who has perhaps misjudged his company, laughed aloud in relief. "A patient some years ago told me that was the custom. He wanted to know if it wasn't a good idea medically. I told him it was a good idea cosmetically. That poor fellow's gone now. In fact his insides had been gone when he came here. I was afraid for a minute the rest of you had profited by his bad example."

"Well, no," Lucas easily lied, "we try to keep up the old traditions."

Angelo liked this, and they might have gone on and on, for the thought of corruption put a sinister bloom on the doctor's manner, but luckily for Lucas there was a distraction. The woman flapping her head across the aisle called "Miss. Miss." Angelo's ponderous eyes wavered, and heavily he pushed away from the desk.

Lucas left the three-sided box--box no doubt for some the entry to smaller boxes, more intricate chairs, and the final straps beneath the violet bulbs--light-headed. Passing Grace, the nurse, he saw she was a beautiful girl of twenty or so, her body firm as a half-green apple. He seemed to skate through the white cones of the doomed, and felt himself, mirrored in the waterless eyes watching, a cruelly vital toad. He was so rejuvenated he played hooky, ignoring Dr. Duff's door and making no appointment.

HIS WORDS with Amy, and the patch of frail grape cloth, reminiscent, in her quilt, had affected Hook poorly. Her speaking so plainly of death stirred the uglier humors in him. In the mid-mornings of days he usually felt that he would persist, on this earth, forever; that all the countless others, his daughter and son among them, who had vanished, had done so out of carelessness; that if like him they had taken each day of life as the day impossible to die on, and treated it carefully, they too would have lived without end and have grown to have behind them an endless past, like a full bolt of cloth unravelled in the sun and faded there, under the brilliance of unrelenting faith. Amy, with her sharp short view, had disrupted the customary tide of his toward-noon serenity. He consoled himself by contemplating the southeast horizon, where, in support of his prediction, luminous leaning cumulus clouds were constructing themselves.

Not that the sun was diminished yet. On the meadow beyond the wall, low where Hook stood, a rabbit paused, a silhouette of two humps, without color. When the creature lifted his head his chest showed its sharp bulge, and a lilac redness was vivid within the contour of his translucent ear--as Hook saw him he had but one ear.

In the wide darkness surrounding the constricted area Hook's eyes could focus on, stars began to dance. They shut off and on with electronic rapidity, midges of dazzlement, and when he sought to give them chase, they removed their field to a further fringe of the sky his eyes made, and with a disconcerting sensation of insubstantiality he realized he had been concentrating into the sun, and that he had had little sleep the night before. He retired early but slept little, waking at queer hours with the feeling of no time having elapsed. Hook shielded his spectacles with the cigar hand and moved the three steps to the wall. Once he had a hand placed on the abrasive tepid surface of a sandstone, he lowered his lids.

The wall, its height slightly waving, like a box hedge, enclosed four and a fourth acres. On the north the rear of the stone barn served as a section of the wall, near a wide gap once for wagons, marked by two pillars, in the mortar of which the hinges of the double metal gates of the old estate were still fixed. There was a less wide entry, more for men than vehicles, also gateless now, at the front--the east--leading into the central gravel walk. On the northeast corner, nearest Andrews, a small gate was kept padlocked, though in the estate's days it had seldom been; Mr. Andrews had intended the wall and the look of the buildings to say "Mine" more than "Keep Away." The Diamond County Home For the Aged lorded over a considerable agricultural plain in New Jersey. The main building, the home, was inexactly an embroidered cube, with a shallow, somewhat hovering roof, topped by the airy cupola. The west wing, once a ballroom, looked added-on but in fact was a portion of the architect's and the second Mrs. Andrews' conceptions. The substance of the great high house was wood painted a tempered yellow weathering toward orange. To the credit of the old carpenters their work still appeared solid, without being thickly made. Along the eaves fancy trim hung, lace wheedled from pine planking. Five lightning rods were braced by spirals of hand-forged iron. The sixth had partially collapsed and pointed diagonally. Maple, horsechestnut, cherry, walnut, apple, and oak trees had grown old on the grounds. There were several broad elm stumps as memorial to the blight.

Hook prayed, requesting that the spell be allowed to pass and that

his children be restored to Mm in Heaven. The face of his daughter occurred to him, when she was twenty-two and not married a year. He asked that he be guided to act rightly on this day. Warm color touched his lids. His mind seemed a point within an infinitely thick blanket.

Steadied, he dared open his eyes. The grass had peculiarly darkened, growing waxier, in anticipation of the rain. The cigar had died beneath the conical ash. A sense of being menaced made him look up. Gregg approached rapidly, limping as he sometimes did though his legs were sound, out of sarcastic anger or excess of energy.

"Where the hell did Lucas get to?" he asked. "Conner must have made the bastard Garbage Supervisor and we'll be lucky if he ever tips his f.ing hat to us."

Hook was pleased to have an answer. "Well: ask Conner. There he stands."

Gregg, nearsighted in the way of small people, had difficulty making out the plump figure of their prefect, where he stood at a distance, by the porch steps.

THE REVERBERATION of descending all those stairs still sounded in Conner's legs, making them feel disproportionately big. From the window, he had watched Hook perform his rounds among the old people, tried to return to work, been wounded again by the complaining contents of the letter, and had let the humid importunate atmosphere Buddy was giving off get on his nerves. The air on his desk cooled; the slats of sunshine dimmed and disappeared. Returning to the window, he observed, through the blinds, a few flimsy clouds, perfectly white, strung like wash on the vapor trail of an airplane too high to see or hear. So near the ionosphere, so far from his fellow-modern watching below, was the aviator that relative to that breadth of blue his progress was imperceptible; yet the length of his trail, intact through half the firmament, bore witness to the titanic speed he was making, alone, in that airless cold.

A few clouds dropping their shadows shouldn't matter. Certainly the immense bowl above could not be filled. But Conner pictured the fair occurring in unblemished weather, like the weather on a

woodcut. The weather of this one day would be, he felt, a judgment on his work; these people, having yielded all authority, looked beyond themselves for everything--sufficient food, adequate shelter, and fair weather on their one day of profit and celebration. He would be blamed, and strangely felt prepared to accept the blame, for foul skies,

He should be with them, his people. By default Hook was capturing the domain. Conner's jealousy deepened. And the aura of holiday, the general dislocation of duties, infected him, and he began the flights of stairs, but not so suddenly Buddy did not communicate, through the simple pink oval of his face caught in the corner of Conner's eye as he seized the doorknob, amazement.

Once out in the open he wondered how he could help, then realized it was not in his position to help. The emotion that had led him down had been proprietorial and aristocratic; one of the ancient men he included had spoken a word and he had followed and been abandoned on the steps, in the sunshine. He was in command only figuratively. In the long era of Mendelssohn's indifference the old people had worked out the business of the fair so they needed little interference. On the third Wednesday of August, such and such was done, regardless of who reigned in the cupola.

Conner stood by two men screwing, with painful slowness, colored bulbs into sockets strung on long cords. They were maneuvering this chore in the dead center of the main walk. Surely they needed at least advice or one of the nun-bier men--Gregg, for instance, who had been, come to think of it, an electrician in Newark--to mount the shaky ladder lying on the lawn, stained by dew, when the time came to string the lights on the posts. He asked aloud how they proposed to get them up. The two went on fumbling without replying.

Conner proceeded down the walk, to where the tables began across the grass. He observed that the tables were poorly aligned, and suggested that a few be shifted slightly. Neither fastidious nor silly, he himself helped, physically, move the tables. He wondered what land of impression this made and did not see how it could be other than good. His intentions were wholly good. Refreshed, he stood a moment by the stand of Tommy Franklin, who filed peachstones into small baskets and simple animals. Tommy himself was away; his handiwork littered the table casually, strewn on the silver boards like brown pebbles taken from a creek-bottom by the handful.

He was conscious of Hook and Gregg at the end of the alley, conferring by the wall. Under their gaze he turned to Mrs. Mortis; she was sitting in a chair and looked unsteady with her absurd towering bonnet. He asked her how she was feeling.

"No better than an old woman should."

"An old woman should feel fine," he offered, smiling; she seemed more accessible than many of the others. "Especially one who can display these lovely quilts."

"They aren't the best I've done; it's hard to get figured rags; so much of this new cloth is plain. It's all made for the young, you know; they want the simple dresses to show off their figures."

Some of the patches she had used seemed so fragile and dry he feared the sun beating from above might shred them. She herself seemed that way; the wire hoop giving her bonnet shape was wearing through; the exterior had faded while on the inner side the pattern was preserved clearly. "Wouldn't you prefer a table underneath the trees? You're in a rather exposed position here."

"Well, if I weren't exposed who'd see me?"

"I meant simply up by the walk, in the shade."

"I'm usually situated here."

"If you prefer it ... though of course there's no difference. I only thought you looked a little pale."

"What do you expect at my age? You expect too much from us old people, Mr. Conner."

His cheek smarted, but he had never found the reply to blunt injustice. "I do?"

"You expect us to give up the old ways, and make this place a little copy of the world outside, the way it's going. I don't say you don't mean well, but it won't do. We're too old and too mean; we're too tired. Now if you say to me, you must move your belongings over beneath the tree, I'll do it, because I have no delusions as to whose mercy we're dependent on." The goiter, from which he had kept his eyes averted, swayed disturbingly: inanimate but still living flesh.

"That's just the way I want no one to feel. I'm an agent of the

National Internal Welfare Department and own nothing here. If it is anyone's property it is yours. Yours and the American people's."

"The American people, who are they? You talk like Bryan; Hookie's always talking him up to me."

"There is no reason," Conner said, with a sensation of repetition that made him stammer, "unless you want to, why you should stand under the sun for ten hours."

"This isn't-an all-day sun."

"Whether it is or not, let me and one of the men move your table and chair underneath the trees." A shadow with the cooling quality of trees shade fell over them. He looked up while she studied him; the cloud obscuring the sun had a leaden center. In great vague arcs a haze was forming in the sky. Near the eclipsed sun a cirrus cloud like a twisted handkerchief was dyed chartreuse; the phenomenon seemed little less eerie for being explicable, as iridescence.

"The chair's not mine; I borrowed it for a second, until the giddiness passed."

He pressed, "It will take just a minute."

She smiled absently, then said, girlishly direct and flirting her head, "If you think up there in the shade I'll take off my bonnet because I make this place look like a fool, I won't because when they come from in town they expect to find fools out here. Anyway I'm half bald."

Vividly, comically conscious of his own thick hair, from the black roots of which the heat of a blush poured down over his face, Conner said, "You're nothing like a fool." In these words he committed his worst error with her. He felt in the air between them her patience with him snap. Previously she had been trying him, tentatively, testing him against her memory of Mendelssohn. The game lost, he spoke more in his own voice. Haughtiness showed. "You have free will. I'm not trying to steal your bonnet from you, or your usual place; I had only your welfare in mind. But we'll let things as they are."

He continued down the alley of tables, obscurely obliged to speak to Hook. It was Hook, after all, who had compelled him to venture down into this unsafe area hours before he was needed. Self-denying by doctrine, he walked against the slope of his desire,

which was for retreat into the buildings and up the narrow solacing stairs to his office.

Yet the spot where Hook and Gregg had been standing was vacant, or seemed so until with a shock he saw the cat. A caramel torn, it held one useless foreleg crooked before its chest, and its face was mashed and infected. An eye was either gone or swollen shut. Three brown snaggle-teeth hung slantwise beneath a rigidly lifted lip.

It looked like the work of an automobile. Another cat could not have produced that crushed effect. The modern cars, run by almost pure automation, became accustomed to the superhighways and sped even on decayed lanes like the one curving past the poorhouse. Conner wondered that the animal had lived. To judge from the advance of the infection the accident had occurred days ago. A disease seemed mingled with the wounds.

It was uncanny, considering the smallness and inhumanity of the face, that there should be distinctly conveyed to Conner, through the hair and wounds, an impression of a request, polite, for mercy.

Though he didn't move, the cat abruptly danced past him, bobbing like a cheap toy, keeping to the long grass near the wall. Conner wondered how he had gotten within the wall.

HOOK'S BLOOD felt thick and dark with this hurrying and confusion. His eyesight seemed further impaired; he saw nothing, in the sense of focus, but received an impression of green as his eyes by habit searched the ground before his feet for obstacles. Gregg beside him was a malevolent busy force in whose power he had unaccountably been placed. Hook felt incapable of leaving the smaller man's orbit. It was better to remain with Gregg than to stay behind and risk association with the cat. Gregg had seen it wandering in the field beyond the wall and like a boy of twelve had scrambled over the wall and captured it. Hook wouldn't have thought he could have captured it, but the creature offered no resistance, merely limped a few yards and then waited. Gregg cradled it in his arms and dropped it over the wall, near Hook's feet; Hook saw that the animal was hopelessly out of order. What did Gregg want it for? To torment, no doubt. He recalled how some of his students, in the days of the smaller school, had beaten a flying squirrel with hockey sticks during recess. Breaking up the screaming ring he had found as its center a grey pelt wildly pulsing

with the parasitic life that refused to loosen its grip, and had had to dispatch it himself, weeping and trembling, with a hatchet brought up from the basement, while the pupils were within with their books. As he imagined it there had been a storm brooding that day; children invariably became unruly under the approach of wet weather.

They were hurrying because Gregg, on fire with his idea, was going to the kitchen to beg scraps for his new pet. Hook, bewildered by the sudden introduction of the animal into his morning study, had gone with him a distance, but at the corner of the big house, he realized it would not do to accompany him further. "You proceed," he said, "I want noth-ing to do with such monkey business."

"Okay, Hookie," the little man said, rudely using a nickname Hook had overheard before but always chose to forget, "You stay here and keep an eye on the tiger. Don't let the cops see it before I give the word."

Fanciful talk. Gregg imagining that a lame cat on these acres would be observed. Superimposing his memory of difficult students on Gregg, he perceived the true motive for his act: it was a disturbance of accustomed order. In abruptly vaulting the wall and dropping at Hook's feet this live responsibility he was making a sardonic comment on the elder man's brittle ways, which could not comfortably deviate a hair from worn paths. Hook smiled to himself. It was different now; teaching school, he had been bound to the students, but here there was no law forcing him and Gregg into association. It did not occur to him that, though Gregg in part may have been teasing his stately old friend, it was Conner's authority the cat's presence flaunted.

Obediently--in a life as empty of material purpose as Hook's, there was little substance to resist any command --he fixed his gaze on the spot far down the wall, where they had been standing. Though his sight possibly deceived him, there was no cat there. He was principally pleased. At his age it was not difficult to believe he had imagined the entire incident, and the cat in his misery was phantasmal. To strengthen his case against Gregg's certain reproof, he scanned all the distant terrain this side of the wall, looking especially under the tables and around the feet of the women. Nothing but trod lawn. The sky in the southeastern quarter was unmistakably darkening now; the thunder-heads had moved up into the sky, grounded no longer on the horizon but jutting from the dense atmosphere like blooms trailing their roots in murky water.

In fact at the moment he first looked the cat was within yards of his feet, and while he inspected the distance the cat had passed his ankles and gone and hidden among the sheds in the back of the house. Hook, blind in all directions but the forward one, was vulnerable to approach from below. He was amazed when a voice by his side spoke.

"Good morning, Mr. Hook."

"Eh? Ah, Mr. Conner; pardon my not responding. I would make a better lamp-post than a spy."

"Are you admiring the view?" Conner was a head shorter than he, with a smooth face that had little harm in it, discounting the sureness and appetite of the young. His eyes were a remarkably light brown.

"Why, yes. It seems overcast."

"I'm hoping that the clouds will be blown around to the west."

A corner of Hook's mouth dimpled at the folly of such hope. The rain was upon them now, in his mind. "The rain would be a great dis-service to the preparations," he admitted.

"WNAM predicted fair and cooler at six this morning."

"These forecasters, now,"--Hook waggled a surprisingly shapely finger upwards--"they can't quite pull a science out of the air."

Conner laughed, encouraged to be striking sparks of life from this gray monument, which had held so abnormally still as he had approached it. Then he insisted, a bit prig-gishly, "Everything, potentially, is a science, is it not? But it takes many years."

"More years than I likely can wait."

Conner good-naturedly held his peace. It seemed a draw. Over by an open window of the west whig a nurse laughed. The tops of the walnut trees were beginning to switch. Hook coughed. "In my boyhood, now, the almanacs would predict the entire weather for the year, day by day. Now they think it bold to venture to say what will come within the next hour. The reports in the paper seem concerned more and more with yesterday's weather."

"Perhaps the weather is more variable than it used to be."

"Yes well: the bombs."

Conner nodded quiescently. He was sleepy; he rose at six, after perhaps five hours sleep--he never knew precisely, the near boundary of insomnia was vague. He hated beds; they were damp and possessive, and when he lay down, words, divorced from their objects, floated back and forth, like phosphorescent invertebrates swaying in the wash of the sea. Day came as a reprieve. This had begun recently with Conner, in the last few years. In his sleepless state, then, he was susceptible to the contagion of his companion's pacific mood.

The figures on the front lawn, at some distance, moved in soothing patterns, silently bumping and pausing. Legs made x's when two passed each other. The activity was as ill-planned as that of an ant colony, but for the moment it did not exasperate Conner to watch. In the frame of mind of an old man idling beneath a tree, he was grateful for slow spectacles. Hook relit his cigar, now short. His eyes crossed in a look of savagery behind their magnifying lenses, and the gasps of his sucking lips assumed, in the enveloping hush, high importance. Moisture walked out from his mouth along the skin of the cigar; the nipple burned; smoke writhed across Hook's face and was borne upward.

Standing so close, and, due to Hook's eyesight, unobserved, Conner could examine the old man's face as intimately as a masterpiece in a museum: the handsome straight nose; the long narrow nostrils suggesting dignity more than vigor; the dark, disapproving, somewhat womanish gash of the mouth; and the antique skin mottled tan and white and touched with rose at the crests of the cheeks, stretched loosely over bones worn by age to a feminine delicacy. It was not the same person--compact, jaunty, busy, menacing--Conner had watched from afar, from above.

"Mr. Hook, have you seen a cat on the grounds?"

Hook's head moved not at all. In time he pronounced, "A cat with the one eye missing."

"Missing or shut. That's the one. It looked as though a car had struck him."

"Ah, isn't it a judgment, though, the way these highways are exterminating the wildlife? By the time you are as old as I am--not that I would wish such a fate on any-body-- the sight of a rabbit or

squirrel will be as rare a treat as the glimpse of a passenger pigeon in my boyhood."

"How did the cat get within the wall?" Hook gave no evidence of hearing. "By rights, it shouldn't be alive at all. Pathetic-looking thing."

"They cling to life extra-ordinarily. My father had a female, Becky, whose hind legs were removed by the mower, yet she lingered another six months and furthermore bore a litter of kittens. But indeed I don't believe her suffering was worth it."

"That's my feeling."

Gregg, unnoticed, had come back from the kitchen with meat scraps wrapped in orange paper. Quick to see Conner, he hid the parcel behind a post of the porch and joined them, overhearing that they were talking of the cat. He had to brave it: "What's this about my cat?"

"Why yours?" Conner asked.

Then Hook hadn't told who had brought it within the wall.

Hook said serenely, "The animal has made a get-away."

"Have you seen it, Mr. Conner?" Gregg asked politely, and continued, less politely, "I guess the damn thing was coming to the fair."

"Yes, I saw it by the wall, and it ran past me. Someone, I think, should put it out of its misery."

"Or else put a tag around its neck," said Gregg, alluding too subtly to the nameplates on the porch chairs.

"What?" Conner had difficulty understanding the excited enunciation of this man.

"Probably it'll be the only goddam thing to come to the fair today, with the storm," Gregg went on, nearly crazy with his own boldness in the face of the fact of Conner's being right there. "If I could catch it," he cried, "I'd wring its f.ing neck."

"If a group of children were to find the animal," Hook spoke out of his memories, "they would make uncommon sport of him."

The idea sickened Conner, children soaking the dying animal with kerosene. He lacked most men's tolerance for cruelty, their ability to blur and forget rumors of it. He wondered if Gregg were ugly enough to make good his insane threat. Perhaps he was; a net of dark wrinkles had been thrown across his face, and his features seemed bright things caught in this net. Conner asked him, "Why would you harm the animal?"

Gregg was taken aback. In tides as variable as those of astrological influence, sense and caution flowed in and out of him; comparatively lucid, he realized he was facing the tyrant of the place and had been saying whatever came first to his tongue. Now Conner had taken him up, ready with a trap. "Why because," he answered, inspired, "it spreads disease."

Conner blinked; this was true.

"Among chickens," Hook interceded, "I've seen the fever brought into the pen by a fox spread so there weren't a half dozen standing by morning."

"Yes, and to humans too," Gregg went on, cleverly sensing he had found a sore spot of Conner's. "Don't they carry typhoid? If Alice sees it, sure as s. she'll let the stinking thing play around in the kitchen." His eyes glinted, and he did a dance step, unable to keep his feet from jubilating.

The cat had not gone far, once it felt unpursued. While the men talked, it returned, having smelled the parcel Gregg had laid behind the porch pillar. Alice had not tied the parcel, so it had unfolded of itself. The scraps--pork, minced--smelled neutrally to the cat; he recognized them as life-stuff, unconnected with pleasure. Dutifully he nosed the chunks, searching for lean; his bowed grave head half-lost in the collar of upstanding orange paper.

"Look there," Gregg cried softly.

As the three men watched, the tomcat, jiggling his head, got the smallest piece between his teeth, on the side where they were not smashed. But the arc his jaw could make was too small for chewing, and the piece dropped back among the others. The thin yellow tail swished twice. For a moment he licked a hump of gray fat, then lost interest wholly, looked up, saw the men, bolted off the porch, and hobbled around the house into the shade.

"Who put the meat there?" Conner asked.

"I brought a little up from the kitchen," Gregg admitted, thinking that now he was in for it.

Conner realized how badly he had misjudged the man; the culpability of the distrust he bore these powerless old people, whom complete material deprivation had not deprived of the capacity for such acts of kindness, was borne upon him. He wished there were some feasible way of abasing himself before Gregg, and he tried to compress all the affection and humility he felt into the gentle-spoken, "I'm afraid it's beyond help."

Relieved to hear in the tone that he would not be punished for trespassing into the kitchen, Gregg did not comprehend the point of Conner's words.

BUDDY, feeling jilted--especially so when, less than an hour after Conner left, sunlight drained it seemed forever from the windows of the cupola--became unable to bear his solitude, and started downstairs, in Conner's cold tracks. The twin had an unspoken terror of being alone, terror so keen that, abandoned, he unwillingly animated dead things --the green steel cabinets, the buried piano, the upright objects on Conner's desk top. These summoned presences intimidated him; he expected at every moment the window to smack its lips and the water cooler to gurgle uproariously. The stairs themselves had a dreadful capacity of closing, the walls meeting the instant before he gained the broad landing. The bannister uprights and their shadows rapidly crisscrossed in a secret conversation that grew shriller as the speed of his descent increased. He broke into the open air of the porch flushed, under the eyes of several inmates, with the pink blank beauty of a Greek sculptor's boy.

Happily Conner was looking for him. His superior was walking down the porch, beside the receding bright-tagged chairs. "Buddy. Good. Are you busy?"

"I came down ... the soft drink truck might arrive. He came last year before noon."

"There's a diseased cat on the grounds. The thing's in pain and should be killed."

"You're sure?"

"That's a curious question; I'm fairly sure of what I see, yes." He glanced up nervously at the blackened half of the sky. "I'm going back up until noon."

To Buddy it seemed that today Conner was always escaping him. It was the work of the fair; the decrepits had everything their way today. He protested aloud, "What do these people want a holiday for, every day is a holiday for them?"

Conner didn't answer him, except by describing where last he had seen the animal, and the direction in which it had run.

BLOND and teenage, Ted, the driver of the soft drink truck, hummed a Spanish tune in duet with the radio:

"Eres niño y has amor,

qué farás cuando mayor?"

It was mostly what you got on the radio now. Ted even got a little tired of all this Latin stuff. Every other movie star was a Cuban or mestizo or something, as if you had to be brown to look like anything. Some guys he knew wore "torero" pigtailed standing up from the back of their heads and sprayed their hair with perfumed shellac. Ted'd be damned if he'd do this. They could call him a Puritan all they wanted.

Turning into the curved road, the asphalt of the edges crumbling into grass, Ted had a creepy sensation of heading into death's realm. The county itself was out in nowhere --farm stuff. A poorhouse in the middle of it was twice as bad. From a Spanish movie Ted had seen he remembered a scene showing skeletons trying to get a young man and turn him into one of them. Ted wanted to get out of this territory fast. He had another delivery before lunch, twenty miles away, not far from his home and near a luncheonette where the girls from high school, including his, gathered to eat pizza and BarBQs. He had fixed his delivery schedule so he could be there when she was; having juggled the list made him nervous. He wasn't sure there was time enough if this took long. He wasn't even sure he could find the damn place. In the movie the idea was that after you

die you're not really dead until a year or so and a scientist right before he died took a drug so he would be able to walk around. Then this colony of dead people he founded had to get the body of a young man or woman every eleven days and until they needed to eat them kept them in a cave. This young guy and girl were in there together and they fell in love. These two lying chained in the cave brought Ted to thinking of his girl, Rita, and of Rita's belly, which she had shown him the night before last. She belonged to some girls' secret club in Newark called the Nuns where they took vows not to let men touch them. But if they wanted they could let men see sections. She had often undone her blouse before, but the night before last was the first time she had lifted her skirt and slid her silver pants down and lay there on the back seat of the car while he kneeled beside her, his hands folded in obedience at his chest. Her eyes and mouth, three shadows in a ghostly face, looked up at him kind of sadly while below, even paler and more luminous, the great naked oval between her waist and the middle of her thighs held in its center one black shadow. Remembering seeing it, the true thing, chased away all the skeletons of that lousy movie.

Finding the place turned out to be easy. He drove under some trees and the land opened up and there it was on the left: a hell of a big yellow house back from a wall. Old people were crawling around like bugs on the lawn. To give them something to talk about he speeded, squeezing the brakes on just at the entrance, so all the cases piled high behind him clattered in gallant style. The radio sang

"Será tan bivo su fuego,
que con importune ruego,
por salvar el mundo ciego--"

He switched off the ignition and with it the radio. "Hey. Amigos. Where does this stuff go?" He caught a look at himself in the side mirror. A brownpaper cigarillo hung from his lips and his crushed cap was tilted steeply over his forehead. When he set his forearm on the sill his bracelet scratched on the steel.

"Where's Buddy?" one of the women asked nobody in particular. She had a thing growing around her neck as big as a bag of groceries:

God. Ted hadn't known there was a garbage dump like this left in all of New Jersey. He even felt sorry for them, living to be so old. He hoped somebody shot him when he got to be thirty.

"Some-one re-sponsible had better fetch him," a tall gent said, not moving himself.

"Aah," a small crusty-looking one said, "what's the f.ing use? Buddy doesn't know his head from his a.h. Why do they order this p. anyway? Who in hell drinks it?" This one had a tongue in his head at least.

"Other years it goes under the trees," a woman said.

Ted asked, "What trees, señora?"

The dirty-faced man broke in furiously, "The trees down there in the meadow, forty miles away. What the hell do you think, what trees? The trees there; Jesus what the hell is your company hiring dumb kids for?"

Ted's heart raced angrily. Though his girl and the distance he had to go to her pressed on his brain, he took his sweet time inhaling sour smoke and stared the dirt-face down. He saw himself at this moment as an elegant snake. "Si," he said at last, as if in the silence he had wrung a confession from his prey. His smile, he felt, was beautiful in its serenity. "And how do I get up there, old man? Fly?"

"Fly if you can; you look the type. If they can't hire anybody except little pansies why doesn't Pepsi-Cola give up? Want me to back it up for you? Fly!--did you hear him?" The other old people made no motion to control this nut; they acted like he was their spokesman.

Ted swung down from the cab. "Look dad," he said, "you're very good, but I don't have all day. A woman's waiting for me in Newark."

"You're from Newark? I know Newark. You ever live near Canby Street?"

"No," Ted said, and blushed lightly; the quick fawning overture had made him feel, in front of these people, big and vulnerable to ridicule and slow.

"Did you ever get a drink in a place called the Ten Spot, on John Street where the old trolley tracks used to curve? Lenny Caragannis

used to run it."

"I don't remember...."

"Before your time? Or are you lily-pure?"

To Ted it seemed that with this sudden searching turn the man had penetrated through his presence backwards into the chambers of his life, and the few treasures there-- his mother's profile, the tolerant face of the brick wall across the alleyway from his bedroom window, Rita's skin glowing white around the cushion of tense hair--were exposed in their poverty.

Dirt-face drew very close. "Whyncha take me back with you? You're a tough kid. You're no company man, are you? You're not in love with the company. Let's go back together. Listen. This is a hell-hole of a dump. You know what they do? They put tags around your ears like pigs. Hook, the kid's going to take me back."

"He'll be sorely repri-manded if it is discovered," the tall one said.

"Come on," Ted pleaded, blushing more deeply, "how do I get this junk in?" He was addressing the others over Dirt-face's head.

"Back it up through the gate," the nut insisted, dancing and brushing against Ted's shirt, "right into the porch, and then we'll be off. You and me, kid. Bang. Bang."

"Is it wide enough?" Ted asked the tall man, who looked as though he had some authority.

"Last year they backed it through," a woman said. More old women and men were slowly gathering from everywhere.

"Now don't start to cry," the small man with the dirty-looking face said. "Why the f. does your company hire kids that can't drive even a kiddy-car? Can you only drive forward? Ram it into reverse."

Ted stepped away from him, plucked the tan butt from his mouth, let it drop at his feet, ground it into the gravel, and said effectively, "O.K."

"Slam her through, dump the p., and I'll get in the seat beside you and crouch down. Then step on it. Don't look back. Do you have a gun, kid?"

THE ONLY GUN within a mile was in fact in Buddy's hands. A .22 purchased by a gardener many years before, when foxes and groundhogs could still be seen in the countryside, the gun was kept, with a few cartridges, on a shelf of a locked closet on the second floor.

The wand of the barrel drifted pleasantly at Buddy's side as he passed between buildings and trees the many colors of which were all, under the stress of the lowering clouds, tending toward the tint of the metal. The color of the barrel seemed the base color of all things. With the lethal weapon balanced on the hooked fingers of one hand Buddy became the center of the universe. In Conner's entrusting him with this task he saw proof of the man's affection, not dreaming how much Conner would have hated to do it himself.

He stalked beneath the windows of the west wing, tall windows designed for a ballroom. He scanned stumps, overturned boxes, corded wood, and half-collapsed sheds leaning sideways, with rhomboidal doors. The thrillers he used to read for recreation began to infest his head. His stealth became exaggerated. At a corner--there was something dramatic and treacherous about a wall changing direction--he paused, fingering the bolt and testing the clip, that it was secure. The springs of the mechanism had grown stiff with rust. The clip probably wouldn't feed the next bullet into the bolt, if he missed with one shot. Buddy stepped around the corner, and there was the cat, not twenty feet away, in the center of an open area strewn with chopping chips. It astonished him how close things looked in this foreboding atmosphere. The cat's face--he could see every whisker and wet streak on it--loomed like a china plate in a shooting gallery.

Holding one leg off the earth, the cat, while staring at Buddy, didn't act as if it noticed him. Just as Buddy had the broad forehead steadied in his sights the animal looked casually away, giving him a piece of neck.

"Meow," Buddy crooned, "mm-row-w-w."

The cat looked. Its working eye was a perfect circle, rimmed opal. Suddenly suspicion dawned in the cat; not a strand of fur moved, but a cold clarity, as if from without, stiffened the forms in the vicinity of the rifle sight; the flat nose and clumsy asymmetric cheeks crystallized in the air of Buddy's vision. With a sensation of

prolonged growing sweetness Buddy squeezed the trigger. The report disappointed him, a mere slap, it seemed in his ears, and very local.

If his target had been a bottle, liquid wouldn't have spilled more quickly from it than life from the cat. The animal dropped without a shudder. Buddy snapped back the bolt; the dainty gold cartridge spun away, and the gun exhaled a faint acrid perfume. Buddy thought, If he had made the river, the secret would be in enemy hands. Going up to the slack body he insolently toed it over, annoyed not to see a bullet-hole in the skull. Chips of wood adhered to the pale fluff of the long belly. The bullet had entered the chin and passed through to the heart. Buddy couldn't imagine how he had missed by so much. Defective weapons, sabotage.

THE SOUND so small to Buddy echoed around the grounds, its loudness varying from place to place, causing curiosity where it was heard. Ted, who had backed around and aimed his truck the best he could toward the narrow gap in the east wall, wondered about it but didn't ask any of the old people for an explanation. The less he had to do with them, the better. The crowd they made menaced him. A few were outside the wall, near his front tires; the rest had bunched inside, leaving a lane between them for his truck. As soon as he had started up the motor they had fallen into position respectfully, as if what they were about to see was a great feat, a modern miracle. Dirt-face hovered near the cab, whisking back and forth with the maneuvers of the truck, flirting with the giant wheels that could crush him.

The gunshot suggested to Ted that he should hurry. The pack of Mexican cigarettes squaring out his shut pocket and the graceful look of his own hand on the wheel were reassuring reminders of the world waiting for him. His truck was still at a slight angle to the opening, but if he went forward in first once more they would get the idea he couldn't drive at all. On the left side he had enough room: six inches. On the other side there was a thin mirror, but the sleek shape of these new GM trucks left a percentage of guesswork in estimating clearance. Ted had found, in driving, though, that you always had a little more room than you thought you did. "Plenty of room," Dirt-face said, "what's the matter? Foot freeze? Shall I climb the f. in there and do it for you?"

Ted pushed the reverse switch and delicately pressed the

accelerator. "Straighten the wheels, kid. Straighten up and you're in." Ted had learned on an old hand-shift truck; automatic transmissions had the one defect of maintaining a certain minimum speed or stalling. It would make him a fool to stall in front of this mob. "More," Dirt-face called, "more." Halfway through, a faint rumbling developed on the right side, where Ted couldn't see. Just grazing. Ted corrected the direction of the front wheels, while the murmuring motor maintained a creeping backwards direction. The scraping sound intensified, but a foot or two further and the body of the truck would be safely through. With a perceptible pang of release the body eased through, and a rock clattered on the running board of the cab.

As those watching on the right side could see, the slow pressure of the metal wall had caused cracks to race through the old brown mortar, mostly water and sand, and a coherent wedge-shaped section, perhaps eight feet long, collapsed, spilling stones over the grass. "Jesus Christ, kid," Gregg screamed, "you better give up. You're nuts!" The destruction was principally on the inner side. For the wall, so thick and substantial, was really two shells: what surprised the people standing in silence was that the old masons had filled the center with uncemented rubble, slivers of rock and smooth fieldstones that now tumbled out resistlessly.

THE TRUCK had pulled up while Conner was climbing the stairs; the subsequent quick clatter and soft rumble of the collapse did not reach the cupola. Buddy's rifle shot had sounded in here like a twig snapping. Conner had no regrets about ordering the animal killed. He wanted things clean; the world needed renewal, and this was a time of history when there were no cleansing wars or sweeping purges, when reform was slow, and decayed things were allowed to stand and rot themselves away. It was a vegetable world. It's theory was organic: perhaps old institutions in their dying could make fertile the chemical earth. So the gunshot ringing out, though a discord, pleased the rebel in Conner, the idealist, anxious to make space for the crystalline erections that in his heart he felt certain would arise, once his old people were gone. For the individual cat itself he felt nothing but sorrow.

Given his post, he had accepted it. Irishly, he had hoped for something dramatic, but the administration of order had few dramatic departments. The modern world afforded few opportunities for zeal anywhere. In the beginning there had been

Mendelssohn's mess to set right: the west whig was converted into a decent hospital; Dr. Angelo was begged from Health and Medicine; there had been painting and building and bustle the first summer, and into the whiter. But over two years had passed; this was his third fair. Many of those who had greeted him here (how assiduously he had attempted to learn the names of that first batch!) were gone now, but the population of the place had grown and was growing. There were rational causes: lengthened lives, smaller domiciles, the break-up, with traditional religion, of the family. The pamphlets and pronunciamentos he daily received in the mail, from official, semi-official, and unofficial bureaus, made it clear and reasonable. Swelling poorhouses had a necessary place in the grand process of Settling--an increasingly common term that covered the international stalemate, the general economic equality, the population shifts to the "vacuum states," and the well-publicized physical theory of entropy, the tendency of the universe toward eventual homogeneity, each fleck of energy settled in seventy cubic miles of otherwise vacant space. This end was inevitable, no new cause for heterogeneity being, without supernaturalism conceivable.

Despite these assurances, however, the limits of being a poorhouse prefect chafed a man dedicated to a dynamic vision: that of Man living healthy and unafraid beneath blank skies, "integrated," as the accepted phrase had it, "with his fulfilled possibilities." Conner was bored. He yearned for some chance to be proven; he envied the first rationalists their martyrdoms and the first reformers their dragons of reaction and selfishness. Two years remained before automatic promotion. The chief trouble with the job was the idleness; not merely that there was so little to do, and that he had to make work, concocting schemes like tagging chairs, but that idleness became his way of life. He was infected with the repose that was only suitable to inmates waiting out their days.

The very way, for instance, he had rather enjoyed the balm of standing by Hook's side for those moments this morning. Or the way he stood by this window content to gaze at nothing, or what amounted to nothing--the red-tin roof of the west wing, the sheds and pig buildings below, segments of west wall showing in the intervals between trees, and the little gate to Andrews, unlocked today for the fair. Someone was passing through, tacking from wall to bush: Lucas. He was sure it was Lucas, even from this distance. He was carrying something in a small paper bag, too big for candy, too small for food. While Conner was trying to make it out Lucas passed from sight beneath the guttered edge of the red roof.

On the glossy varnish of the window sill the canted pane of glass installed to minimize drafts laid a peculiar patina, a hard pale color neither brown nor blue.

Conner had chosen to stand by the west window because the spectacle of preparation on the east lawn scratched his eyes; he didn't wish to be made to feel that he should go down and play shepherd. Buddy was with them; little could go wrong. It was futile anyway; the coming rain cancelled everything. The western sector of the sky was as yet unclouded. Between the tops of the trees and the upper edge of his window oblivious blue held the firmament. Then a cumbersome tumble and crash resounded, and Conner witnessed an appearance of the phenomenon which two millenia before had convinced the poet Horace that gods do exist: thunder from a clear sky.

DOWN FRONT Buddy was arranging with Ted that Pepsi-Cola would pay for repairing the wall--there was no cause for tears. Everybody had insurance. As he could see, the wall was rotten anyway. Buddy, dropping the shovel with which he had not yet begun to dig, had rushed to the accident and found its perpetrator oddly child-like. In a voice husky with apprehension the boy insisted that it had not been his fault and that he had to get to Newark in a matter of minutes or lose his job. The driver was rather handsome, in the rococo lower-class style, and Buddy instantly began to mother his innocence. The two young men were about the same height and complexion. An old man coming late to the confusion imagined at a distance that here was Buddy's twin, visiting. Buddy in fact was more highly colored, five years older, and educated. Consciously superior but distinctly tender--still elated with his outwitting the cat--Buddy helped the driver guide his truck backwards along the walk. Then the two rapidly unloaded the consignment of soft drink, rapidly because a few drops were falling, speckling the turquoise tailgate. At the thunderclap the old people scattered, gathering quilts and preserves and crude toys and canes and pieces of patient embroidery. As they hastened toward the porch, under strings of colored bulbs now swung in the air, the fourth noise of the half-hour summoned them, encouraging their flight, the ringing of the lunch signal, a tall hammered triangle used in the days of the Andrews estate to bring in the hands from the fields.

THEY ATE in groups of four at small square tables of synthetic white marble purchased cheaply from a cafeteria that was discarding them. The rain falling across the high windows, high from the floor, had the effect of sealing in light and noise, so the tabletops shone garishly and the voices of the old people shrilly mixed with the clash of china and steel. Mrs. Lucas was saying of her parakeet, calling really, though her companions at the table were only noses away, "Poor thing has to have some exercise, you can't ask it to sit there like a stuffed ornament, in my daughter's house it had great freedom. It can't have that freedom here, but it has to have some; its cage is too small for it, poor bird, its tail feathers stick out and it can't turn around. In my daughter's house the cat caught it and took off its tail feathers--that's the final result of all the freedom they gave it--and when they grew in, nobody thought they would, they grew too long, so the feathers stick between the bars and it can't even turn around. It can't have the freedom here it had in my daughter's house, but that's too much, not being able even to turn around. So out of simple mercy I let it out at least once in the day, in the forenoon usually. Oh she's cunning. I think it's a she, because the coloring is dull, and a male, you know, has all this brilliant plumage. I keep thinking I could clip the tail feathers with the sewing scissors but they say no, it's like taking a foot or hand off a human being, they lose their balance and don't feed and grow listless. So when I come back from baking the buns--and wasn't that futile, now that the fair's washed out?--I let her out to do her tricks on the window catch and the picture frames. She even swings on the geraniums, doing her little acrobatic tricks. Oh, she's clever. If you let her out when the faucet's running she'll try to fly through it like a waterfall. Who was I to know he'd"--she snapped her head toward her husband, who munched slowly, because each unmeditated bite accented the soreness in his ear--"barged in right when she was on the knob with a bottle of nasty stuff in a paper bag and let the pretty little thing flutter out the door into the hall?"

"It won't go far," Lucas said.

"And then he won't even chase it. How can I chase it, with my legs?"

"We left our door open," he explained. "When it's got out before it's always come back. If you leave the door open."

"There's always the first time," she said, speaking, like him, to the other two, who acted as the channel of their argument, "and how do we know this isn't the time it will get caught fast, with its toenails? You know their toenails have to be trimmed. I didn't know that. If I had known half the trouble the bird would be I wouldn't have let her wish it on me. Anything my daughter doesn't want--she's on the move day and night, never in the same place more than a week it seems--she thinks, Oh Mom up at the Home will be glad for this. She has nothing to do. She's grateful for anything. She has nothing of her own."

"Joan doesn't think like that," Lucas explained.

"Well she didn't think twice about wishing the parakeet on us. She bought it for her boy and the boy tired of it after a week, as you might expect. So, ship it off to Mom, and let her spend her pitiful little money on fancy seed of all sorts and cuttlebone. Let her clean the cage once a day. Let her worry with the bird's nails. They're more than a half-circle and still growing. It gets on its perch and tries to move off and beats its wings and wonders why it can't, poor thing. I thought I could take my sewing scissors and trim its nails myself; they're fragile-looking; you can see the little thread of blood in there. But evidently you can't. They'll bleed unless you know just where to cut. My daughter sent along a magazine, on how to take care of them. They'll bleed if you don't know just where you can cut. So we have to wait until he takes it into his head to go into town with the cage to the dog doctor in Andrews. It costs money, too. It's not free. They have free medicine for humans but for any little bit of animal care you have to pay, and they call this progress. I said, you know, if you tell them you're from the poorhouse, but no, he wants to pretend he isn't."

The Lucases' companions at the table were homely Tommy Franklin, who made small baskets by filing peach-stones, and Elizabeth Heinemann, a blind lady he sometimes guided about and always escorted at meals. Tommy, fearing that the other woman's hurried talk would tire Elizabeth, and anyway feeling a need to put his voice before her, began softly, "Your talking about scissors reminds me. . . ." He was so shy of talking the Lucases fell silent, to hear him, and he had to proceed. "Last month I took the bus to

Burlington, to see my brother, and I noticed when I got on this old woman talking to the driver. I didn't think about it any and always try to mind my business because you never know. . . . Though I was looking out the window darned if she didn't sit down right aside of me. I guess she figured, another old person. . . . Well, she had been a nurse, she said. And she goes into this long story about how years ago she was called in to care for an old rabbi who had pneumonia. The house was full of nice things, she said, very expensive and well-kept. The rabbi's daughter kept the house. But underneath this beard, which went down to here, according to their religion, was where this terrible mess connected with his disease was, she said. She said the first thing she did was to go to the store and buy scissors, and a razor, and shave him. The daughter, she said, howled something terrible. And when the doctor came he took one look at the old fella and his eyes popped and he said he would never have dared to do that." Somehow when the woman had told it, this sentence was more of an ending. Tommy glanced at Elizabeth; her eyes were brilliantly fixed on a spot past his shoulder. She had a long neck stretched tall by her perfect posture; at this moment her wide mouth was broadened further by a sweet smile of expectation. Confused and inadequate, he went on. "I asked her, didn't he try to stop you, and she said, he was very sick. I guess he was unconscious when she did it. So I had to sit there Listening to her tell this all the way to Burlington. Your mentioning scissors put me in mind of it." It had turned out wrong; when the woman had told the story, there had been a righteousness in her action and a kind of justice in the close. His way it sounded simply as if he were against the

Jews, when he had no feelings toward them one way or another.

"I guess she thought," Lucas said, "it being a Jew, it made no difference." He studied his food, boiled potato white on the white china on the white table-top. Potato, meatloaf and broccoli was the meal, big because this evening, if the fair were in full swing, there would be no supper. Lucas never found his appetite until dark, and after Angelo's fooling any pressure on his left gums made it ache above. Still he appreciated that Conner tried to feed them well. His thoughts predominantly were with his morning's purchase, a pint of rye, and the relations it would assume with his pain.

His wife, who during her recital had fallen behind, was eating rapidly.

Elizabeth Heinemann said, "Isn't it pretty, the rain? You never feel alone when it rains." Her clean neck elongated to bring her closer to

the drumming overhead, which in the first movement of the storm was savage, though she wished it even louder, to clarify her confused inner world of tilting purple tumuli, a pre-Creational landscape fairly windowed by her eyes, the navy blue of a new baby's.

"DIDN'T I see Buddy's twin on the lawn?" an old man at another table asked.

"Buddy has no twin," Gregg said. "That's just what they say to excuse Buddy for being a moron."

"No. In a crushed-cap-like."

What the old man--Fuller--saw dawned on Gregg, and the tension of mischief smoothed the net of wrinkles on his small face. "Driving a truck?"

"I saw the truck. I didn't see him drive it." Fuller was wary of Gregg.

"How do you think he got here? Flew? You think fairies can really fly?"

"No, in a cap with his sleeves rolled up."

"Buddy's twin. He came up from Newark to see his f.ing brother. It was very touching. Gypsies had split them in the cradle. The only trouble with the twin is he got this job driving a truck and he can't drive a foot. He knocked down a big section of the wall out front."

At this point Fuller sensed that Gregg was having him on. He looked toward Hook, who he knew would speak the truth, but Hook was saying, "It was re-markable, the way the stone fence gave. You would think, now, that the few end stones would fall away and leave the rest stand. Yet a whole tri-angular section held together, the cracks in the mortar running in a straight line. Indeed it will cost Conner a pretty penny to have it repaired; the stone masons nowadays are used to setting nothing but bricks and the cinder blocks."

"Who was the young man I saw on the lawn then?" Fuller asked.

"Buddy's twin he means," Gregg said.

"Buddy's twin? Buddy's twin is in Ari-zona." Gregg's signals to play along were quite missed by Hook, who turned considerately to Fuller, known as soft in the head, and explained, "That young man drove the Pepsi-Cola truck here, and was nothing like Buddy. Buddy is educated."

"Educated how to be a pain in everybody's a.," Gregg said.

Fuller's broad downy eyebrows twisted a bit in perplexity. "Who was it who came from Newark, then, the driver or the twin?"

"The driver is the twin," Gregg said.

"The twin is in Ari-zona," Hook repeated, "in the southwest, where they are doing such wonder-ful things with irri-gation."

"And who fired the shot?" Fuller asked, his soft brain affably manufacturing a third image of Buddy, this triplet holding a rifle, for he knew that around the place the only person willing and permitted to handle a gun was Buddy.

Neither Hook, whose attention at the moment had been fixed and who was incapable of receiving side impressions, nor Gregg, then buzzing around the motor of the backing truck, knew to what Fuller referred. "The kid, the twin," Gregg answered quickly, "he had a gun in his pocket. He was a tough kid. He tried to kidnap me."

"A gunshot?" Hook asked.

"Out back," Fuller said. "It was why I came outside, now that I remember."

"That wasn't a shot," Gregg told him, "that was just your own head cracking you heard." Ashamed of having said this, he stood up and added, "I'll get dessert." As the youngest and best co-ordinated of the three, it was fitting that he should. He brought back four plastic dishes of peach halves, and ate his and the extra one while his companions were still chopping theirs with spoons.

BECAUSE he had not been naturally shaped for solitude --indeed a native gregariousness had been a factor in Conner's early dedication to a social cause rather than a more vertical and selfish career, in a science or art--he felt despairing as he proceeded down the deserted stairwell and was glad to come upon Buddy, his one friend in the

place. With a bang of the outer door the boy emerged into the hall, drenched. His torso beneath the soaked adhesive shut declared its forms. The collar was recklessly open; in the V the tan hollow at the base of his throat pulsed. His face was red with exertion and his wet hair hyacinthine. "That's done," Buddy breathed, taking Conner's presence there casually. "The soft drinks are stacked under the trees by the porch. Not that we'll have anybody to drink them, except maybe Noah."

Buddy's flip acceptance of the rain, Conner's enemy, cut slightly. He asked, "Why did you have to handle the cases?"

"Beyond and above the call of duty," Buddy sang: parody of Conner! "The driver of the truck, a lovely youth, was so abashed by his error of smashing down our wall that he would have been incapable of completing his delivery. His impulse was to hop astride his mount and flee to Newark, where he was planning, I gathered, to deflower a local bloom."

"Smash what wall?"

"The late Mr. Andrews's. Haven't you seen? It made an audible thump."

"No I haven't. Did you get the kid's name, or were you both too excited?"

"I was calm as the proverbial vegetable. He was the tot. He even imagined one of the inmates--one of the smaller men--was planning to hide in his cab and make an escape. I begged him to take several, but with a tremor of his bedewed lashes he declined. Behold, his name."

Conner took the wrinkled damp piece of paper offered him, scribbled in Buddy's somewhat studied Italic hand. "What do you think he'll tell the insurance?"

"Lies, nothing but lies. He spoke pidgin Spanish in his dangerous, composed moments."

"O.K. Thanks for everything. You better change, Bedewed. What happened to the cat?"

"Cross him off your list. Our secret is safe."

"Buried?"

"Not yet. I rushed to rescue our friend Ted."

"O.K." Conner let a frown show, pettishly, since of course there hadn't been time. Now with the rain the cat must lie uncovered. A sadness of sorts pierced him, and he asked, "About the wall. Can I see the damage from the porch?"

"Nothing easier, alas. It's no mean hole." This last was called on the fly, since the boy was running up the stairs, removing his shirt as he went.

The warm sense of shelter given by a porch whose railing is spattered with rain insufficiently offset Conner's disappointment with Buddy, his feeling that they had met at incompatible angles, and his renewed awareness that it was still the fate of his kind of man to be, save in the centers of administration, alone. The rain, falling absolutely, with an infrequent breath of wind turning a section temporarily oblique, pounded the porch rail, and a spray so fine it was more of an aroma than a mist rolled in to the wall, dampening the yellow boards, making the tops of checker tables glisten, and tinting the wicker chairs a darker vanilla. The air turned white; a fork of lightning hung above the distant orchards, shocking each spherical tree into relief. Seconds later the sound arrived. The clouds above formed a second continent, with its own horizon; a bar of old silver stretched behind the nearly tangent profiles of the farthest hills and clouds. Again lightning raced down a fault in the sky, the thunder following less tardily. On the lawn before him there was no sign of the day's celebration save the empty aligned tables and the cords of colored bulbs strung on the poles. The fumbling old men had somehow done their job.

Through veils of rain the damage was indistinct: a discolored patch of some length, and a curious pallidity, as if the wall had been stuffed with oyster shells or fragments of plaster. It did not seem to interfere with the silhouette of the wall. While it could have been worse it was bad enough. With the shortage of craftsmen weeks would pass before a mason could be got out here. In the meantime the stones that littered the lawn should be collected. On the day of the fair the poorhouse was on view; his management would be incriminated in the apparent collapse and neglect of the wall, right where everyone entering could see. All his conscientiousness was denied by that section of stone. He hated the tongues of townspeople. A sentence from the disturbing letter of the morning recurred to him: Yr duty is to help not hinder these old people on there way to there final Reward. Their final reward, this was their

final reward. How much longer before people ceased to be fools? It had taken the lemur a million years to straighten his spine. Another million would it be before the brain drained its swamp? An animal skull is a hideous thing, a trough with fangs, a crude scoop. In college, he had been appalled by the conservatism zoological charts portrayed. With what time-consuming caution had the tree-shrew's snout receded and its skull ballooned! He could picture the woman who had sent him the letter, her active pink nose, her dim fearful eyes, her pointed fingers crabbedly scraping across the paper--a tree-shrew, a rat that clings to bark. When would they all die and let the human day dawn?

He wished the rain more vehemence. In the volume of space above the lawn, set like a table for a feast, the impression was not of vacancy but of fullness; the feast was attended.

WITHIN the dining-hall most had completed dessert but few left. Where had they to go? Some days they hastened to get into the open, or gather by the television, or get to their duties. But today was what weather could not change, a holiday. They remained seated at the small white tables, enjoying the corporate existence created by the common misfortune of having their fair washed away. "Now in all Mendelssohn's years," Hook stated, "I don't recall inclement weather on a fair day."

"That bastard Conner's afraid to show his face," Gregg said. "Why doesn't he come eat the garbage he gives the rest of us?"

"Can't you picture Mendelssohn now?" Amy Mortis asked at another table. "How he'd have us all singing and shouting prayers and telling us how we all must die? Ah wasn't he the man?"

"Yet we'll see him again," the woman beside her reminded.

They were seeing him now. A great many eyes had lifted from their food and were directed by common impulse toward the vacant dais where the prefect had had his table before Conner came and deemed it arrogant to eat elevated above the inmates. These eyes conjured there the figure of the darkly dressed stocky man with spindly bird legs, nodding his large head with the great nostrils in the lean nose and the eyes pink-rimmed as if on the verge of weeping, and they were again seated at the wooden tables now on the lawn, eating in long rows on cracked and various plates, and

afterwards singing in unison, "She'll be coming round the mountain" and then "Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war" and then "With arms wide open He'll pardon you." As the songs grew more religious the rims of Mendelssohn's eyes grew redder, and he was dabbing at his cheeks with the huge handkerchief he always carried and was saying, in the splendid calm voice that carried to the farthest corner and to the dullest ear, how here they all lived close to death, which cast a shadow over even their gaiety, and for him to hear them sing was an experience in which joy and grief were so mixed laughter and tears battled for control of his face; here they lived with Death at their sides, the third participant in every conversation, the other guest at every meal,--and even he, yes even he--but no. Today was not the day for talk of bad health. As the Preacher saith, To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under Heaven. This was the day intended for rejoicing. Though for the moment the rain had obscured the rays of the sun, in another hour these rays would break forth again in the glory of their strength and from all the points of the compass people in the prime of their lives, carrying children in their arms, would come to this famous fair.

Conner, who entered the room at the side, had in nearly three years become enough attuned to his wards to perceive in the silence and the one direction of the heads the ghost posturing on the dais; he took a tray up to the counter with his head slightly bowed, in the manner of a man, however insolent, who arrives late at the theatre.

Conversation commenced. The live prefect displaced the dead. Buddy, entering in a crisp shirt and with his damp hair combed flat, blinked at the clatter; one vast bright beast seemed contained in an acoustic cage. The old people began to stand and leave; Buddy and Conner would be left to finish their meal in a nearly deserted room, while the kitchen help, youngsters and matrons from the town of Andrews, waited sarcastically for these last dirty plates to be handed in. Many reported to work at noon, so the kitchen smelled of raincoats.

GREGG overtook Lucas at the spot where Conner and Buddy had met a half-hour before. An oblong of water still stained the crimson linoleum, worn brown where people walked. "Where the hell have you been all goddam morning?" Gregg asked. "Conner make you his Garbage Supervisor?"

"I went in town." Lucas's lower lip, shaped like one of those rare berries that is in fact two grafted together, protruded defiantly. He liked Gregg less and less, Gregg who had never known family, who had never had a woman take the best half of the bed, who still lived in a boy's irresponsible world.

A coward in the face of blunt hostility, Gregg modified his tone. "What did he say about the tags?"

"He said it was for our good."

"S. he did. When that pansy gives a thought to my good I'll be a bag of fertilizer."

"It was interesting to see how his mind works. He said some of the women complained for their husbands who couldn't get a chair when they came in from the fields. So he thought he'd put these tags on and make every chair somebody in particular's."

"God, what a birdbrain story. He's even a bigger nut than Mendelssohn with his singing hymns. Christ, we get the rock bottom here."

"Then he made me go to the west wing, when I hadn't complained, and Angelo jabbed at my ear until I won't be surprised if I go deaf."

"I hope you do. Then sue the s. out of them. You know what I thought? I fetched a cat into the yard this morning, and what we should do is take off the tags and make a collar for the cat--it's a hell of a sick cat, dead on its feet damn near--and sneak the cat up into Conner's office. He's scared s.less of the cat anyway; I was talking to him this morning."

"You were talking to him?"

"Why not? Hell, he came down nose-poking and I went up to him and said, Look out the cat don't eat you, Conner. Listen. I said, This place is full of wild beasts, Conner, bears and tigers as big as your swollen head. You should have seen him stare."

Lucas smiled. "And he didn't say anything?"

"Now what could he say? He's not my boss. Nobody's my f.ing boss here. You think I'm lying."

"Oh, no. Lions and tigers, I believe you, Gregg."

"Bears and tigers. What'd you go into town for?"

"When?"

"This morning, you said you went into town. Lucas, you're slippery. You look slippery and you are."

Wanting to hit Gregg back, Lucas picked up the handiest weapon, the truth. "I went in to get a bottle of rye. Angelo gave me the idea."

"Screw, you didn't."

"Screw I did. I have money. I do a little work around here."

"Being a pig's friend you do. So: Marty's little boy buys a bottle of rye."

Lucas's brain, had not the dull earache been occupying the best part of it, would have ordered his body to walk away, because Gregg's jealousy was driving his tongue beyond all reasonable bounds.

"So: the pig-feeder and the bird-keeper are going to set down in their nice little cozy room with all the holy pictures and get a load on. Son of a bitch if that isn't a picture."

"Martha won't touch it," Lucas said, meaning to show how he operated on his own initiative.

But the sound of the remark was so feeble Gregg laughed delightedly, with genuine good humor. "Well then, share it with me. And some others I can get hold of. Where is it?"

"In my room."

"We'll see you on the porch. Nobody will be sitting out in the rain. I'll steal a cup. Come on, we'll make a holiday out of this mess yet. Come on."

The image Angelo had planted in Lucas's mind had been that of several men drinking together on the grass behind the wall, which was unfeasible due to the rain, so he agreed.

HOOK made haste to be among the first to enter their common sitting room, Andrews's old living-room, furnished in black leather and equipped with a vast cold fireplace. On the central round table

he knew the newspaper that the noon mail had delivered would be placed. It was there for him. Many of those who would have coveted it had gone into the smaller room on the other side of the hall, where the mail rack stood, to see what letters had come. Hook had this advantage: there was no one alive in the world who would write him a letter.

He settled on the sofa and unfolded the paper to the obituary page. After perusing these unfamiliar names he revolved the paper to the opposite page, where the editorial opinions were found. The chief one was titled "Two Horns of the Canadian Dilemma":

What shall be done about overweening Montreal? Public opinion is rising hysterically against our neighbor to the north. Two months ago the Dominion was pointedly excluded from any of the chairmanships of the Free Hemisphere conference held at Tampa. The increasingly austral orientation of our policymakers is mirrored by hatred voiced on every street corner against the Old Lady of the North. Now if ever is the time for level-headed review and reassessment of the causes and factors which have led up to the Canadian imbroglio at present facing our policymakers.

The St. Lawrence Seaway, less than a year away from its crystal anniversary, created a new Mediterranean Sea in the nation's heartland. The Great Lake ports of Chicago, Detroit, Duluth, and others proudly expanded to fit their new role of oceanic ports. Despite the warnings of Eastern manufacturers Washington took no steps to discourage the precipitous shift of the nation's economic fulcrum from its traditional position in the Northeast--a shift that did incalculable long-range harm to New Jersey industry and shipping. Montreal bided her time. Not until the commitment of capital and manpower was irrevocable--and here is proof of the thoroughgoing cynicism of her motives--did our courteous neighbor to the north apply her strangle-hold. In the last six years tolls on the St. Lawrence locks have more than quadrupled. The American Midwest has woken and discovered itself locked in the humiliating relationship Paraguay in South America has for centuries endured in relation to Argentina, astride its sole artery to the sea. At the moment of writing it costs more to ship a ton of Nebraska grain from Chicago than from San Francisco, through the Panama Canal, to Europe!

The Canadian dilemma must be understood as having two horns. On the one hand....

Hook had difficulty reading this. The light coming in the windows behind him was gravely muted by the weather, and he had to hold the paper to one side, to avoid the yellow shadow of his head; his face was tilted far back awkwardly so he would get the benefit of his bifocals. His attention moved to the political cartoon. An elderly lady, wrapped in shawls labelled CANADA, hypocritically smiled as she twisted Uncle Sam's arm, which was spiralled as tightly as a rope. Tears flew from his face. The caption was, "Don't Worry, Sam, We'll Get Those Kinks Out Yet!"

Hook folded the paper horizontally and laid it on his knees. Immaculately he interlaced his fingers and laid them on his abdomen, which sloped comfortably as he relaxed into the sofa's inclination. His eyes rested on the drawing of the old lady and she seemed very pleasant in her animation. Without forethought his consciousness faded and he slipped into sleep.

MARTHA had come to the room ahead of him. "No bird," she said. "No little bird." She was sitting on the bed, her lap spread disconsolately; all her public talkativeness (he knew her better than that) had faded away.

He looked automatically for a sign of green life in the thinspun cage, the delicate door of which stood ajar. The little white bath, like a miniature saltlick, held a silent eye of water. The rain outside, steadily filming the panes of the room's one window, seemed to call to this eye. "I don't know what we can do," Lucas said.

"I know it's stuck somewhere. Its claws made nearly a full circle: why couldn't you have taken the poor thing in town?"

"Now Martha. Do you imagine someone trims the nails of the bird in the jungle?"

"That's the jungle. When you take them out of the jungle you become responsible."

"Well, I'll look around the halls."

"Oh my poor legs."

"Here." He went to the bed, plumped out the pillow, then took his

wife's ankles and, operating gently against the slight protest of her body, lifted her legs to the bed, so her head fell back into the pillow. She stared at the ceiling.

"On my feet all morning making those buns that now can't be sold," she said.

He took the thin coverlet at the foot of the bed, unfolded it, and dropped it over her, saying, "The room's damp."

"It's the sudden drop in temperature," she agreed. "The twinges I can stand, but this constant dull ache. . . ."

"Close your eyes," he said, "and when you open them, see what's in the cage."

"No letter from Joan," she said with her eyes closed.

On the way out he lifted the bottle from the bureau lightly, not wanting the paper bag to rustle. In the hall he hid it in a niche, behind a statuette of a woman whose thighs swelled through a wet nightgown. One of her hands floated in the air and the fingertips of the other touched one hip. The cylinder her bare feet posed upon was plastered into the bottom of the niche, so she had never been removed, though the mantle of dust on her shoulders had grown black. The patches of dirt the upward-tending planes of the face had received, contrasted with the bright white of the sheltered spots--eyes, and beneath the nose and the lips--gave her a clownish anxious aspect independent of the modelling.

The parakeet must have gone to the left, for to the right, after three doors, there was a dead end, a window laced with chicken wire that could with great effort be opened onto a fire escape. The window and escape were Conner's innovation; in Mendelssohn's day they would have burned.

This was the third floor. To the left Lucas travelled down a bleached corridor, and came to a crossing, four staring corners sharp as knives. One wall still bore ancient medallion wallpaper; the rest were spray-painted ivory. He looked to his right, and there, fluttering at another window of wire and glass, was the parakeet, a dipping arc of green nearly black against the luminous color of the rain.

Lucas approached lightly but before he got very close the bird, of its own volition rather than from an awareness of being chased, darted

to the right again, down another hall. By the time Lucas reached the end of this hall the bird had vanished. The channels of wood and plaster were again meaningless. The corridor the parakeet must logically have flown down had windows on the right and vibrated with shadows of the downpour outside. This row of windows gave the effect of a ship, an enclosed promenade; the clammy light fell through still air, free of dust, as at sea. He softly walked down the hall, next to the skin of the house; down below, the roofs and foreshortened fronts of some outbuildings were visible. Through the door of one shed he could see the rug of straw spread in there, dry. The radiators beneath the windows were heating; fog crept up the lower panes. To his left the successive doors were closed; occasional thin cracks revealed flecks of paint and cloth and dead matter. The corridor led to the stairway. Lucas with circumspection moved around in front of the stairs; in his stealth he felt enormously thick, cosmically big: his shoulders were Jupiter and Saturn.

The action of his feet became unconscious; the stately mass of the upward staircase passed in front of him and to his left. He stopped short, his coarse breathing suspended. On a steel bannister on the fourth floor the bird roosted fussily, shifting its awkward feet on the too broad perch and fanning its wings for balance. The bird was so small Lucas fitfully lost sight of its green in the multiplication of planes created by looking up the stairwell diagonally. Then it flickered, and with a whirl mounted the terrible volume below it; hung there angrily, not so much beating its wings as shaking them in a tantrum, above Lucas, who stared beseechingly at the spinning pale belly, even stretching out his hands, to attempt to catch the bird as it fell. The parakeet folded its wings and dipped between Lucas's head and the leaning edge of olive iron beneath the stairs, veered down another corridor, and with an abrupt backwards motion, landed, and like any small gentleman walked through a waiting open door.

Desperate, yet convinced in minutes it would be over, Lucas ran down the hall, so unused to running he ran crooked, his shoulder heavily brushing the wall. This was the west wing. He had marked the door where the parakeet had entered and threw it open. On a white bed beneath white sheets a sunken invalid lay, dreamy with heavy injections, the sheet falling away where the legs should have braced it. The parakeet was perched on the foot of the bed.

THE GREEN FLOWER had sprouted unsurprisingly; the appearance

of a bear seemed to follow from that. Now the bear growled. It seemed sorry for something, but then he was sorry too, and though there was no need to say so he smiled. The bear pointed; the flower leaped; the flower skimmed over the ceiling, and at a command from the bear the door closed sharply, saying "Idiot." The bear lifted its black arms and sank from view, and the flower bloomed on the bed, its bright eye frightening. He was glad when the bear came again. A chair fell lazily, and the bear was of course sorry about that, and ashamed. Then the bear grew very clever and plucked the green flower from a picture on the wall. He was so proud, he tried to show it, but of course if he opened his hands too wide the flower would leap again. It occurred to him that it all had been arranged to amuse him, and he laughed obligingly, so they would not feel sorry, and continued laughing when they had gone through the door, for them to hear, though curiously he was not sorry when they had left him alone again.

DOWNSTAIRS the strange thing was Conner's entry into the sitting room. He himself felt the strangeness keenly; it was a criticism of him. When the dining-hall had emptied quickly after his arrival, Buddy's chatter had grated unfeelingly on his sense that in two and a half years he had quite failed to get himself across to these people. And he felt, important within him, something he should get across, a message more momentous than his desire to be their friend, "friend" being perhaps less the word than "guide." So he courageously decided, today being a dislocated day anyway, to join them sociably. There was in his decision a shadow of the supposition that Mendelssohn--so much in the air since the rain began--would have done so. Once, however, in the room where he knew they tended to gather, he hesitated; the old people were grouped in the sofa and the chairs by the window, and a conversation held their interest. Only Mary Jamiesson noticed that he had entered. The surprise her face showed him made it harder for him to declare himself; tightened the screw on his silence.

Hook was saying in a speechifying manner, ". . . received money from the hands of the northern manufactur-ers. Now that was what was said in my father's day."

"Look at an old penny, John," Amy Mortis said, "the next time you have one. That's the face of no grafter,"

"Hav-ing your face on coinage," was the considered reply, "doesn't

make an honest man. Else why would we hold the opinion we do of the Emperor Nero?"

Hook tilted his cigar with satisfaction at himself. His antagonist's goiter shook as she made a crude counter-thrust. "You don't think then he should have freed the slaves? You think the slaves should still be that way?"

"Ah, they still were. Had the northern manufacturers been half so concerned with the slaves in their own mills as they were with those in the fields of the South, they would have had no need to make the war for the sake of munitions profits. But they were jealous. Their hearts were consumed by envy. They had taken a beating in the Panic of '57. The civilization of the south menaced their pocket-books. So as is the way with the monied minority they hired a lawyer to do their dirty work, Lincoln."

"They should have kept the niggers down then?" Amy said, restating her charge, with the implication that it had been evaded by the old debater.

Conner conceived of a way to postpone inserting himself into their circle. The room was damp and chilled by the change of weather. None of the inmates had thought to light a fire, though dry wood was stacked pyramidally by the great fireplace, a black carved thing shipped from Bavaria by Mrs. Andrews, as fruit of a flighty excursion. All he needed to light a fire was paper. He moved about, with only Mary Jamiesson studying him, searching; accustomed to his office, he was bewildered that a room could contain so little paper. In a dark corner he did find, meticulously stacked on a table, some copies of a monthly publication of the Lutheran diocese titled Sweet Charity, forwarded to a male pensioner who had died the previous year in the west wing and to whom this musty stack appeared to form a monument. Conner took several of these white magazines and crumpled them.

"Not down," Hook said, "but not everywhichway either. Where do you think the freed Negro was to find work, if not on the home plantation? Now did the manufacturers want him in the northern cities? Now if I may have a minute of your time, good lady, endure this old fella for the length of one anecdote. Rafe Beam, my father's hired man when I was a boy on my father's farm ten miles this side of the Delaware, came from Pennsylvania, and had been raised near a settlement of the Quakers. The Quakers among the city dwellers had a great reputation for good works, and in Buchanan's

day were much lauded for passing the runaway slaves on up to Canada. Ah. But the truth of it was, this old fella who was the patriarch of the sect would harbor the Negroes in the summer, when they would work his fields for nothing, and then when the cold weather came, and the crops were in, he would turn them out, when they had never known a winter before. One black man balked, you know, and the old fella standing on the doorstep said so sharp: 'Dost thou not hear thy Master calleth thee?' "

Everyone laughed; Hook was an expert mimic. The hiss of avarice and the high-pitched musical fluting of the hypocrite had been rebuilt in their midst, and Hook's face had submitted to a marvelous transformation, the upper lip curling back in fury, then stiffening to go with the sanctimony of the arched eyebrows. Smiling a bit himself, he pulled on his cigar and concluded, "And no doubt he was a fair specimen of those so desirous to aid the Negro."

It puzzled Conner to overhear such lively discussions of dead issues. The opposition of Republican and Democrat had been unreal since the Republican administrations of a generation ago. The word "Negro" itself was quaint.

Dark-skinned people dominated the arts and popular culture; intermarriage was fashionable, psychologists encouraged it; the color bar had quite melted. The Enforced Reforms and Regulated Riots, so stirring to Conner's youth, might never have occurred, to hear Hook talk.

Silently Conner laid the paper and logs and applied a match. He pictured his presence being at last revealed by a triumphant burst of flame. The glossy stock of Sweet Charity burned reluctantly, however, and the dark oily smoke slithering from the air spaces between the logs persisted in curling into the room. After a minute flames were visible and it became clear the chimney would not draw; the flue was closed. In a hurry Conner poked his head into the fireplace, looking for a catch, and as rapidly withdrew it, at the scent of singed hair. The lever must be on the surface of the fireplace. There seemed to be only carved bearheads and scrolls and cherubs dotted all over with highlights. Mistrusting Ms eyes, his hands fluttered across the black craggy surface, cold as marble.

"Buchanan, I suppose," Mrs. Mortis said, "was doing a first-rate job, eh John?"

"A ver-y unfairly esti-mated man," Hook slowly replied. "The last of

the presidents who truly represented the entire country; after him the southern states were slaves to Boston, as surely as Alaska. Buchanan, you know, had been the ambassador to Russia, and was very well thought-of there."

A small man with broad eyebrows, whose name, Conner believed, was Fuller, came over softly and whispered, "I think this does something." He touched a short chain hanging from the mouth of a bear, and Conner roughly pulled it. For a moment the fire continued sluggish and smoky, then the draft caught; with a jerk the smoke whipped inward, and the dry logs roared. "Birch," Fuller said, "has its own smell don't it?"

"Where is that smoke?" Amy Mortis asked aloud.

"We've built a fire," Fuller said before Conner could himself speak.

Conner wondered if the man knew who he was, that he should presume to protect him. But if he did not know who he was, why come to his rescue with the flue? All the eyes in the circle except Hook's and a blind woman's focused on him. He knew he should speak and took a breath to begin.

Staring at a beam of the ceiling, Hook announced further variations in his argument. "The panic of 1857 and not the Negro lay behind the attack on the south. When the shooting died the Negro became merely a cause for peculation. The administration of Lincoln's man Grant was without a doubt the most crooked the nation had seen until the other Republican, Harding, came to power. Now he was around in my time: a man you would have thought dirt wouldn't cling to, as tall as a church door, and trimmed like Moses...."

"Well you can't blame Lincoln for Grant," Mrs. Mortis said.

Hook's mustache broadened humorously. "They were as close as Baal and Mammon," he said. "Lincoln was no lover of morals. In private practice he was an atheist, you know."

"A Deist, wasn't he?" Conner said. "A Unitarian."

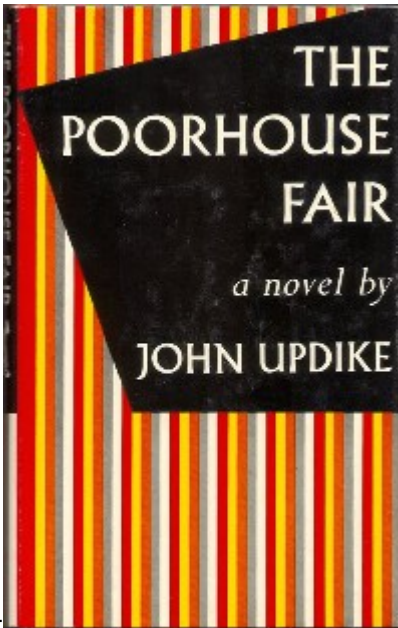
"Is Mr. Conner with us?" Elizabeth Heinemann cried beautifully, turning her head on her slender neck pathetically, as if she could see.

"Yes, dear," Mary Jamiesson said, "he's been building us a fire."

"I heard that someone was. Thank you, Mr. Conner."

"Thank you," Tommy Franklin echoed, and further murmurs sounded.

"You're quite welcome--I, I'm sorry that this rain has delayed the fair."



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